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SOLITAIRE

By Ed. L. Carson

IN HIS clean and cozy cabin, by the wood-fire's cheerful glow,
Heedless of a blizzard raging over wastes of driving snow,
Bedrock Ben sits playing Canfield, runs his fingers through his hair;
"Life," he says, "I find is much the same as playing solitaire.

"Starting in, the game seems easy, things are coming all your way—
Just one cut and Luck's stampeded, leaving you without a play;
Everything ganged up against you and it seems a trifle hard
That a man can miss a winning by the color of a card.

"Watch the way the deck is running; see the clubs that blocked me then?
That's one merry little mix-up twixt the sheep-and-cattle-men;
Gee, my hocks did surely rattle as I fled that vale of tears
Spurred by fond anticipation of a term of twenty years.

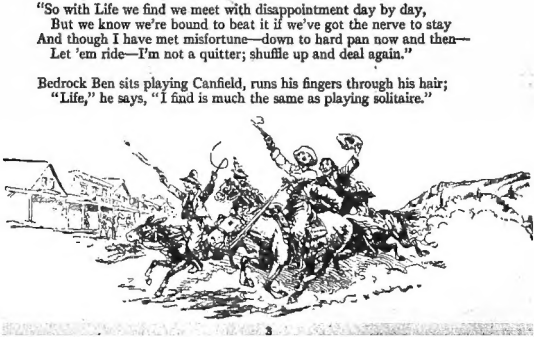
"Mark that spade, that cussed three-spot, there's a card that makes me sick—
That, one dizzy drunk in Denver, cost a claim on Cripple Creek;
Womack told us where to find it, then we had to celebrate,
Fooled around and all got pie-eyed, got there just a day too late.

"All those court cards ganged together look some like a row in town;
That's the time that Cultus Charlie bumped off poor old Bull-head Brown.
Sure we had to lynch the jasper—too darned handy with his gun—
Just my luck to plug the sheriff—morning found me on the run.

"See the queen of hearts I'm missing, covered by the ten of spades?
Old Man Death stepped in between me and the loveliest of maids;
For a time I sure was hostile—seemed like Fate had used me rough—
Till at last I saw the reason—I was never good enough.

"So with Life we find we meet with disappointment day by day,
But we know we're bound to beat it if we've got the nerve to stay
And though I have met misfortune—down to hard pan now and then—
Let 'em ride—I'm not a quitter; shuffle up and deal again."

Bedrock Ben sits playing Canfield, runs his fingers through his hair;
"Life," he says, "I find is much the same as playing solitaire."



GILA JOE

By ANTHONY M. RUD
Author of "Red Sticks"

The unreasonable jealousy of old Stephen Lassiter drove Joe Braden from the Gila Bend ranch; drove him into the Territory of New Mexico, where the name of Gila Joe was soon listed among that wild region's surest gunmen

CHAPTER I

THE LONG ROAD

THEY did not call him Gila Joe—then. The Gila Bend Mountains which buttressed the Painted Rock range to northeastward were commonplaces like the parched gramma grass; like the river itself; like the unpassioned, greasy shale; like the herds of sinewy longhorns which, tough and privation-accustomed as so many camels, cropped a thirsty existence from the dusty, sparse vegetation.

Joe Braden he was to all and sundry. Dear Joe, to just one young woman, who now swung dreamily back and forth in a whipcord hammock, listening to thumbed guitar chords and the interminable, highly colored, romantic nonsense of the ballad "Jeanie MacNeil."

Jeanie MacNeil's in love with me,
And I'm as happy as can be
For, oh, what a wife,
I'll have in Jeanie MacNeil!

Many of the verses of this old range lyric could not have been sung to a feminine hearer like Claire without extensive emendation. Joe sang them excellently, covering occasional lapses from the strictest meter with an added *tinkle-tunk-whang* of the vibrating strings which savored of the magician's art. Claire never suspected that this song was one which had been howled and jeered through honkatonk and hell-hole, as well as sung to the reddened evening star on thousands of miles of range. She loved it. The rim of an ochre moon just then was sailing upward, showing its deliberate, mellow light above the eastern foothills. Claire looked at it, clasped a little tighter the hands which encircled her slim knees, and wished with all her heart that Joe would turn, would feel the full magic of that moon for one long, unreasonable moment.

Such was the length and breadth of heaven for these two, this ten minutes or half-hour between Wallace Braden's discomfited retreat and the time stern old Stephen Lassiter demanded that his daughter be in bed. Both young men, Joe and Wallace, lived at the ranch-house, it was true, and enjoyed Claire's company at meals and during occasional gallops about the range. Stephen Lassiter was about most of the time, however, and when he was in the room or near the girl he lavished an attention upon her which was little short of idolatry. Claire returned his affection to the full; if at times she might

have hungered for a more personal escort by one or another of the suitors, not a hint of such a notion ever showed in her speech or bearing.

Outside this circle, and for the turbulent years from the time the first herds were grazed in southern Arizona until the partial taming of the troublesome Apaches in 1878, Stephen Lassiter owned one friend —an acrimonious comrade, indeed, yet one tried in bitter days of thirst, wounds and the lifting of many scalp locks. This was Rouse Keenan, Indian fighter, scout and plainsman, whose love of a poker antagonism had induced him to settle down in his declining years, building a ranch adjacent to the prosperous Gila Bend.

Rouse never made a success at the more sedentary occupation. Though it remained a secret locked in the breast of old Stephen Lassiter himself, dozens of calves each year which legitimately should have been adorned with the Bar-U-Bar of the Gila Bend ranch, became bawling, motherless members of the 333. And so Rouse Keenan lived to play poker with his neighbor, even when his hands shook and the eagle eyes which once had picked unerringly the back of a prowling Piute from a sand waste of almost identical color, blurred and watered.

Claire Lassiter spent with Joe Braden and the sleeker, long-lashed Wallace Braden, these evenings when Stephen, her father, played cards with Rouse. Joe always was comradely, quiet. Wallace, unable to leash impulses at once disquieting and unconvincing of sincerity, paid open court to the girl. Some of this she certainly did not discourage. Before her skillful ability at verbal *carte* and *tierce* he almost always lapsed into sulks sooner or later. However, the end of each evening found him at Stephen Lassiter's generously equipped buffet, sloshing Kentucky whisky into a glass intended for ingredients of a beverage less potent, and scowling back toward the veranda where the others remained. Which showing of ill temper displeased Claire and Joe Braden less than it might have under other circumstances.

Claire secretly loved the boy who sat there on the steps. He was four years her senior, doing a man's work on the range so well that a short time before, a retiring foreman had advised Stephen Lassiter to boost this son of an old friend to the fifty-a-month job.

Almost at that identical time, however, Rouse Keenan played his last game of poker. Ten o'clock, the hour at which Stephen Lassiter invariably rode home, arrived. Rouse was winner. He was smiling tremulously. Instead of rising to accompany his visitor to the door, he made an attempt, then settled back in his chair.

"Good-by, Steve, old man," he quavered, lifting a chill, horny palm to Lassiter's firm clasp. And in that moment, while Rouse Keenan's beard sank to his chest, Stephen knew that the last of the old knife- and gun-fighters he had called comrades in the heyday of strenuous middle age, had ridden on to a land unshadowed by the mountains at sundown.

In certain ways Stephen Lassiter changed thereafter. He grew more silent, grim. He sought the love of his daughter as steadily, yet there were evenings—those on which old Rouse always had awaited him—when he rode alone. And Lassiter became more prone to look moodily at both Wallace and Joe Braden, particularly when Claire was with the three. Then without explanation the owner appointed Casey Larr, a competent top hand but a man wanted for bigamy across the line in New Mexico, foreman of the Gila Bend.

This night the lonely veteran of Appomatox returned from one of his starlight rendezvous in the foothills, just as the yellow moon cleared the last jagged upthrust of the mountains. He walked his mount to the corral, unsaddled, watered the animal, then glanced sidewise at the stoop of the bunkhouse.

There sat Casey Larr. He, too, saw the moon. As the guitar chords sounded from the ranch-house veranda, Casey whimsically tilted up his chin, and fiddling with his fingers as though he held some fantastic instrument, he sang. Honors were about even between Joe Braden and himself. The foremanship was a proud distinction to Casey Larr; and Joe had the smiles of a pretty girl. In addition, the wide-mouthed, likeable Irishman had memories—some of them passably sweet, at least when a yellow moon hung in the sky. Lassiter heard him sing to Joe's strumming.

Jeanie's arms are snowy white,
And how her lips lift to invite
Oh-h-h, what a gir-r-r-l,
I've got in Jeanie MacNeil!

If the legendary Scotch lassie looked down and listened, she must have smiled alike at the youngster and the bigamous

foreman. Both knew the spring magic of that yellow moon. But slowly and surely, as that moon cleared the Gila Bend range, its color changed. It paled. It attained the faint, steely luster of frost on a trunk line railway track; of the curious, basilisk glare in the glistening jealousy of a man whose eyes have drained from gray.

STEPHEN LASSITER was no fool. He owned the ranch, and had fought out success against Indians, drought and rustlers. None of these perils had altogether ceased. In the years to come this region again would become the battleground—the scene of a final stand—between the red man and the white, with the latter winning remorselessly, though paying a heavy price for the arid and semi-arid lands even he could not value at the worth they were to assume. Drought always would harass. Rustlers likewise, as long, at least, as hidden arroyos, canyons and gulches remained in the mountains.

To Stephen Lassiter, mindful of the first terrible costs paid by the pioneers, it seemed that a pall of peace had fallen upon the land. Perhaps it was as well. Success of a distinct kind was his. The ranch now paid what probably would be a peak of returns for many years. Longhorn cattle were due to find less favor in the market. Lassiter would have put in a herd of thoroughbreds except for the fact that he was finding, at times, that he cared too little for the up-to-date details of ranching. His wife was dead, his only son idled at Gettysburg, a fourteen year old bugler. By this late second marriage he had a daughter, who had become everything. She was the image of her mother, a girl who had given her life for the existence of a dubious little six-pounder of a girl child. That girl child was Claire. And Stephen Lassiter, two years old when Andrew Jackson won the Battle of New Orleans, neither asked nor expected any more from life than the love and companionship of this daughter.

That a youth he had befriended sought to take from him—already *had* taken from him, if eyes and hearing could be credited!—the love which was the sole softening of a grim old age, was intolerable hurt. For a month and more Stephen Lassiter had walked with eyes before him far on the horizon, or lowered to the dusty grass. Now those old eyes raised. He looked through the ephemeral moonlight toward the veranda on which the guitar was played. And he turned toward that veranda with grim decision in every line of his bearing.

Gila Joe listened, first in chilled astonishment, then in hurt. He dropped the guitar, unheeding its *clungg* of protest. Thrice he tried to speak, to break in upon the chill, scornful arraignment of himself. The tongue of Stephen Lassiter, once freed from the leash of restraint, went further in denunciation than even its hard-bitten old tyrant had imagined possible.

At Joe's age both Lassiter and Joe's own father had sought hard for success; had pulled more than one tailfeather from the elusive bird. Only the war had delayed the fullest consummation. Joe Braden himself had no excuse. He idled. True, he worked in an easy job for an old friend of his father; yet what did that signify? Nowadays it was easier to occupy an assured job than to get out and hustle. Joe Braden was nothing but an idler, an excrescence upon the Arizona range. He was not the sort of a man Stephen Lassiter wanted to see evening after evening—he ignored the fact that these "consecutive" evenings for the most part lay at least a week apart—with his daughter. Claire was only seventeen—well, seventeen and eleven months. Four years more should pass before she accepted the attentions even of a *real* up-and-coming man!

There was more. Joe Braden slowly eased himself upright. Sheer, unbridled astonishment gave way to a profundity of hurt. The hurt passed in slow resentment. This man was his benefactor; it was he who had taken the childless Joe Braden, reared him almost as a member of this family—like Wallace Braden, the hatchet-faced, toadying cousin—and had allowed the two boys all the chance for schooling the Gila River country afforded.

For the first time in his life Joe Braden suddenly realized what it could mean to be twenty-one, and on his own. Stephen Lassiter's words were plain, caustically bitter. Joe was receiving—had been getting for three years—the pay of a top hand. He even had been considered for the job of foreman, and discarded because he regarded his job so lightly.

For the first time Joe Braden realized that his beloved guardian, on an occasion striking home vitally, might not be above twisting the truth to suit his cherished ends! Joe understood, at least in part.

The girl near him, her perfume of hair and loveliness even then borne to his nostrils, knew also. Her tight-drawn breath, her inability to speak even one word in contradiction of her father, testified. Stephen Lassiter for the moment *hated*, and the sole cause was the love which had sprung up between Joe Braden, son of Stephen's old partner, and Stephen's daughter.

Joe got that clearly. The arraignment was too severe for other interpretation. Also came to his arteries a surge of independence. In that second of realization the last clinging trace of adolescence fled. Joe Braden became a man. At once he steadied and thrilled to the sense of power and steadied maturity flowing through his limbs.

He turned. His hand went out, clasped the white fingers of Claire, who stood utterly terrified, hopeless.

"I shall come back. You wait for me," he stated clearly, his voice low but resonant, carrying complete conviction.

At the shadowed doorway Wallace Braden, disgruntled, futilely hating the stronger cousin, raised his lips in an involuntary snarl. Wallace lacked only an inch of Joe Braden's height, and nothing in weight. Wallace was softer from head to foot. Stephen Lassiter added a hazlenut of muscle to the corded ridges along his jaw. Only Claire heard with even a thrill of hope; and events following fast upon that declaration almost were to obliterate every vestige of that girlhood love and faith.

Lassiter broached bitterly the name of a man on whom Joe Braden's life was to pivot.

"You take after your uncle," he accused. "Always the women have kited a'ten him. Love 'em and leave 'em—you've heahd him make that boast! Well, I don't want any Joachim Bradens around my girl!"

Joe Braden, curiously, had a tremendous hold upon himself. His back was to Claire. His spurs cut in against the pine planks of the veranda steps, raised in a fierce pressure against the jutting plank. Though he did not guess the fact, one of the tiny nickeled ratchets broke from its extending arms of steel and fell beside his right heel. He descended the remaining two of the four steps.

"Uncle Steve," he said, with a not unbecoming dignity, "you've paid to dad all that friendship demands. Some time I'll try to square up for what you've done over and above that. For now—" He hesitated, then plunged on with a hint of shame in his tone. "I—I don't own hardly a blame' thing, Uncle Steve. I've got four months pay coming, though, and I've got a couple hundred in the bank down to Vierra——"

"All that will be paid you tomorrow," stated the elder, stiffening. "Your horse, a dozen horses, if you wish——"

"I don't wish, on that sort o' square-off," broke in Joe incisively. "You-all have made me see I'm standin' on my own feet now." Unconsciously he lapsed into the freer language of the range. "I'm aimin' to pay my way, allus rememberin' a big debt to you an' Miss Claire. I'm takin' my buckskin hoss, a saddle, bridle, an' what I've got on. The pay'll even that, probably. Good-by!"

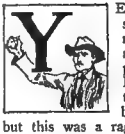
"Before you shake with me, Uncle Steve, remember what I said. I'm comin' back for Claire. An' it won't be long!"

"I'm damned if I will!" crackled the old man, jerking down his doubtfully extended hand. "Get out!" and he did not turn his head as Joe Braden, with one gesture of his finger tips to lips, a kiss thrown back toward the shaken girl, passed into the night.

"Claire, Claire," Stephen Lassiter called. But she had gone suddenly, almost colliding with a tall, slim young man, Joe's cousin, who stood listening on the inside of the doorway.

CHAPTER II

THE SPUR



EARS under the brassy sun of the Southwest make no man a fathead, an egotist, or a complete ninny. Stephen Lassiter had lost his temper, was consumed by a white heat of rage; but this was a rage he could not quite analyze. Sufficient for the hour, and for many hours thereafter, was it that he had turned to discipline a boy, and discovered a man. Considerable of a man, too; that made it all the more unbearable. Joe Braden could make good upon another ranch. In fact, he would be missed sorely upon this one. With a moderate success to his credit now he would return, as surely as the moon would sink there in the west this night. And on his return Claire would go, really *go!* Not just transfer a part of her affections.

Lassiter cursed. He raised one blue-veined fist and shook it toward the sky

dows to the southward. For many moments he could do naught but growl vituperation toward the youth he had loved almost as a son. Then he swept about, fists held out rigidly from his sides as though they clutched a pair of the old-time duelling pistols.

A glint of silvery light from the third step caught his eye. He blinked, furiously shutting out anything as trivial as a silver dollar possibly lying there. Yet a queer, star shape remained in purples and yellows upon the ground glass of his retina. Subconsciously he analyzed it. A spur ratchet. Sweeping down one long, black-garbed arm, he sought to pick it up with fingers which trembled strangely. Between thumb and forefinger. Joe's, of course. Damn him!

Stephen Lassiter found little solace within doors, either that evening or during a restless night. His fury cooled, congealed, froze. It became the demoniac emotion of one obsessed. He wished with all his heart that Joe Braden long since had been stricken dead. He formed stealthy, sly plans to build up a partial recompense of affection between Claire and the other Braden, Wallace. Of course this time he would blight that tie, if Claire were fool enough to accept it, in short order. He would cure the girl. She would not want to marry until she reached a mature age, at which time—thirty or thirty-five, perhaps—she would have placed flowers upon the grave of her father.

With the false dawn Stephen Lassiter emerged, stalking to the corral, and saddled a bronc. He buckled on the scabbard containing his 45-70, and adjusted the criss-crossed belts supporting his holstered Spracklins—huge revolvers which had been the first competitors of Colt's single-action six-guns known to the range. Just what he hoped or expected to meet at three o'clock in the morning, would have been hard for him to explain.

He rode on and on. At mid-morning, nine o'clock, Lassiter was returning, his mount jaded by the heartless urging of a furious, purposeless ride beyond the range and into the sparse mesquite and cactus of the waterless desert.

Lassiter crouched now. With shoulders high and bearded chin settling against his chest, he looked for all the world like some neckless, fabulously ancient buzzard astride a slightly moving carcass. His throat was parched; but it was more the salt of hate than the burn of alkali. His eyes showed red-rimmed beneath the bushy brows of white—but a hundred times this veteran of the range had drunk and gambled the sun from its oblivion of night into its heaven, then bowed and smiled indulgently as he took his place at a late breakfast, untired to all outward appearance.

Hate!

The passion could not consume him, could not wear itself to shreds as it surely must have done in the furnace of a younger man's emotions. It remained near white heat, crusting perhaps, yet none the less malevolent. Had Stephen Lassiter come upon Joe Braden also riding in the dawn, one or the other would not have returned. As it happened, something even more grievous was on the cards of the mocking fates.

Spitted undignifiedly across the jagged spear of a broken Joshua trunk splintered by lightning, the rider glimpsed a shapeless lump. It could not interest or even irritate him from a distance, yet he did not divert the stodging, fatigued bronc from the trail which led close. After minutes of forgetfulness the thing suddenly became plain. It was the body of a man, one evidently wounded in several places and then stopped in a final flight for cover. No weapon was in his hand. None lay near. Since the stains from his several wounds began with six paces to the rear, he evidently had been surprised from ambush. Back there a smudge upon the sandy soil, beside which the deeply dug footprints of a horse galvanized into sudden action, told the tale. Murder. Cold murder.

Then Stephen Lassiter made a discovery which caused him to forget his anger and almost contemptuous indifference. The dead man was Joachim Braden, father of Wallace, and uncle of Joe! This fact ordinarily would not have been of special significance, save for facts pertinent—or which seemed so this night—which long had remained unsaid. Joachim was known to have killed Black Joe Braden, the father of young Joe. True, the fight had been somewhat of an even break as six-gun battles go; but it had been the culmination of a one-sided hatred begun many years before when Black Joe won for wife a woman whom Joachim coveted.

Joachim, for more than a decade, had been a suspected rustler, horse thief, and general bad man; one who avoided towns save on the rarest occasions. True, he had been convicted of no wrong doing; yet in the reaches of the range judgments were made and believed, generally with all justice, without ordered briefs and arguments such as lawyers summon nowadays.

Here was Joachim Braden, shot four times. Back a little way in the chaparral were evidences of footprints, partially dusted out, unrecognizable. Suddenly interested, Stephen Lassiter dismounted stiffly. He walked with knees bent, reached the corpse, and rolled it to its back.

"Dead some houahs, sho'," mused Lassiter.

He bent to examine the black holes, matted brown and red. These holes, two of them in the victim's back, were clean cut, calibrated by six-gun slugs which had not started to mushroom.

"A .44, Ah reckon," muttered Lassiter. That did not mean much of anything. Almost every man in this territory, except the very old-timers, used either .44 or .45 Colt's revolvers or Smith & Wesson's. "Nobody'll care; nobody'll give a damn—unless—" continued Lassiter aloud.

Of a sudden his eyes shut down to slits, uncompromisingly. They glittered steely fire as they had glittered in the old days when his big, cumbersome five-shot had pointed toward a deadly enemy.

"By God, I've got yuh! Yuh—damn—coyote!"

The breath whistled through his teeth. His fingers fumbled in the pocket of his long, scalloped, black vest. They closed on something hard and pointed. It was the sharp-pronged ratchet of a nickeled spur.

Chapter III

DONE IN

HEN Joe Braden rode from the ranch which had been his home for eleven years he did not head for town. Vaguely in the back of his mind lay the purpose to ask a job of Ches Motte, owner of the B-Bar-Hanging-L early on the morrow. Ches had offered a foremanship three weeks earlier on hearing how Joe had been disappointed at the Gila Bend. Of course another man got the place. Ches had not been swayed in the least by sentiment; and there was no reason why he should have been. In looking for a billet as top hand, however, Joe remembered the man who had wanted him before.

For this night the B-Bar-Hanging-L meant nothing. Joe did not ask more than a lazy walk from his buckskin, who plodded along, conscious that the master was looking far oftener at the chill, lonely stars than at the mesquite. After a time he stopped, took the leather from his buckskin, and wedged himself in a roll of blankets thrust feet first into the chaparral.

The night was mild. Morning held a tinge of chill, but it caused the sleeping Joe merely to draw his long knees nearer his chest. He did not waken until the first long, slanting rays of sun fell across his battened eyelids.

Hungry and thirsty, he made his way two miles to a water-hole, first. With himself and the buckskin sated on slightly bitter water, he headed for Tres Casas, the dirty little Mexican town which had quadrupled the dwellings responsible for its name in a century of existence, but had changed nothing else—including the fleas. Many a disgusted cowpuncher had sworn that he had been bitten into a pattern of tattooing by the same vermin, plus great-great-great-grandbuglets, which had made his visit uncomfortable a half-decade earlier. Naturally, visits of white men to Tres Casas were few and far between.

The place had water and grub of a sort, however. Joe was wise in the matter of menus in the Southwest. He had a motto: when you're eating with the redskins, take redskin grub; it's better. And he stretched that truth to cover Mexican chow—with certain exceptions. He knew the exceptions. Thus he sat down to a breakfast at Tafa Alto's, consisting of meat-stuffed pears, coffee as thick as a black bean puree, tamales, and frijoles. He ate heartily, dodging the outside carcasses of the pears, which looked like cordovan boots.

"How you come 'ere now?" queried the gossipy Tafa, who saw few white men, and who yearned for news of any sort.

"Oh, outa the desert," responded Joe negligently, between sips of the high-powered coffee. "I had a job to do out there."

He neglected to elaborate—to his infinite regret. Tafa never was to know, never was to see, the inside of a court of law, simply because a cowboy customer was too taken with the business of absorbing Mex grub!

HERIFF DON BIXBY of Vierra arrested Joe. There was no trouble about it. Joe, that morning, had applied for and got a job with the B-Bar-Hanging-L outfit belonging to Ches Motte. It was nothing but good business with Ches; he could not have been expected

to demand from his hands any accounting for past time. He did not care a jot whether his men prior to employment had fought Indians or delirium tremens. If they did their work on the ranch, that was all which interested him. When Joe was taken from the afternoon scouting after mavericks said to be numerous on the Motte range, Ches pursed his lips. He was sorry, but it was no vital concern of his. He gave one dollar and twenty-five cents into Joe's hand, and proceeded to forget that he had hired the man.

Sheriff Bixby sounded ominous and positive. He seemed to have a clear case against the young puncher. A man had been murdered. This victim was Joachim Braden, he who had killed Joe's father. Long ago Joe had been heard to promise that he would tend to Joachim's hash, fry and turn it. Now Joachim was found murdered, evidently from ambush. The sheriff claimed to have evidence far surpassing the tenuous thread of an ancient threat, but he was not disclosing it before the trial.

If Joe Braden reached a regular trial the jury would have a tiny, nickeled star thrown in their faces. *Ff!* The chances were strong that the flimsy jail in Vierra would not hold a known murderer for long. Not that the punchers and townies of this region ever had cared one worthless Continental for Joachim Braden. That man had been guessed shrewdly enough for what he was, a swindler, rustler, and general no-account. Still, a murderer in jail loomed as something of a standing challenge. Sport to get him out. Sport that only would anticipate by a few days, or two weeks at most, the findings and execution of a legitimate jury. So Vierra bubbled, drank red liquor, hobnobbed, and delightedly headed into the mob spirit.

Sheriff Sheldon Bixby really could not be blamed. He knew of the Bradens, but only through the disrepute of the man who had been killed. Joe Braden, to him, was Joachim's nephew, nothing more. The evidence against this young avenger was plain; and of the sort called "hellious" by a cowtown jury. Joachim Braden needed killing, perhaps; but he had been ambushed and shot in the back!

Bixby said nothing industriously for a full hour. Being silent, he had to have a half-dozen excuses. In fact, he had nine. Three of them were cigarettes, and the remaining six were supplied by a man in a white apron. After the sixth Don Bixby felt that he had discharged the responsibilities of his office, and was one of the boys again.

"I'll tell yuh, yo're wrong from the word start to the word finish," he proclaimed, bearing glass number seven in his left hand as he strode half the length of the marred cherry bar in order to jog the elbow of a puncher who had sworn his belief in Joe Braden's innocence.

"Wrong, dead wrong, I say. Have a drink?" He slammed down a silver dollar.

"Not on that, I won't, hombre," retorted the puncher, glowering out the epithet in the manner which universally is conceded to be something of an insult when coupled with this particular word. "Yo're explaining a heap. Talk turkey!"

Sheldon Bixby was not overly acute of perception. He nodded affably, filling his own glass.

"Jine me, any time," he bade. "It's larripin' good truck, stuff t' build fur on yore chest! As I was sayin'," he continued hastily, gulping down the drink as he saw a telltale tenseness appear in the attitude of Joe Braden's unknown champion, "the goods is plain on Joe. I'm kinda sorry, but they is. Y'see it's this way." And he detailed a long, rambling account, no more than one-quarter fact, of his pursuit and detection of the man who must have killed Joachim Braden.

The turbulent puncher and three or four more, listened patiently. Occasionally a wink passed, but it was not a sign of mirth.

"Then," said the objector, "it all figgers down to this. There was deep heel prints out there which meant a cowman, or somebody wearin' high-heeled boots, waylayed him. The corp' was shot plumb dead, an' through the back, by a covey of .44 slugs. Joe Braden totes a .44 an' wears high-heeled boots—like all the rest of us, mostly."

"An' he swore he'd even up with Joachim," reminded Bixby, half-sobering before the lash of the other's satire.

"Ye-ah. How long ago? Wasn't that before Ralph Wale bought this here bar, more'n five years back?" demanded the puncher, bristling up and thrusting his expanded chest full against that of the sheriff. "How old was Joe then? Just a kid fifteen or sixteen. How come yuh remember that long? I seen the time yuh didn't know yore own name from hell to breakfast!

"An' say!" The objector waxed more vociferous, possibly because he was a puncher who never had set eyes upon

young Joe; was drawing entirely upon range gossip for his oratory. "Yuh ain't got one real thing ag'in him, I'm tellin' yuh. All that tripe means jes' exactly nothin' onless yur come through with a chunk of proof; an' that's something yuh ain't got against young Joe. Joe Braden's my friend, least, he's goin' to be. One piece of real proof, I mean. Yuh got him in jail, an' I'm goin' over now an' shoot up the damn place, because yuh ain't got any proof."

Absentmindedly the dissenter swept into his clasp the bottle of liquor left on the bar since Bixby's invitation, and poured himself a sizeable drink.

Sheldon Bixby was partially exhilarated, but not numbed. He snorted.

"One chunk of proof. Lookahere!" he snorted. And down upon the cherry planks was slammed a one-inch, many-pointed star of metal. *Clingg!*

"Thar's the proof!" bellowed Bixby. "I found that right a-side the body. I know right well Joe Braden wears that kind of spurs, the sort that hitch on with two rivets to the top of the heel. Nesselroth's sell 'em.

"When we come across Joe Braden, we found Joe with the nickeled clips of his right spur empty. And this here star fitted!"

"That's so," bellowed a deep, melancholy voice from the wall beyond the first poker table. "An' his right six-gun was dirty, even if the chambers was full. Said he'd been throwin' down at a coyote. Coyote, hell!"

"That was flatterin' Joachim Braden."

ALONG the corridor of the frame jail Deputy Sheriff Quint Greenwood patroled back and forth, forth and back in front of the twelve bars of the only cell. Quint wore a pair of large caliber Smith & Wesson six-guns, one of which never had been fired. They sagged from his crossed belts, butts protruding from the thonged holsters at an angle of forty-five degrees from Quint's lean thighs. He half-crouched as he perambulated, turned sharply, perambulated again. He was outside the bars, peering in at the first non-Mexican prisoner the building had housed since his accession to office.

Without a doubt the deputy felt his oats. He more than suspected that an attempt would be made to lynch the accused; and a further hunch that, in such a contingency, Sheriff Sheldon Bixby would surrender without bloodshed to the apparent voting strength of the county.

Not Quint! Though a man who never had engaged in a single gun fight on his own, being immoderately slow, nervous and near-sighted—as well as modest and cautious to a fault—he saw here a duty plain. To give him full credit, he forgot for the nonce the fact that Joe Braden more than once had saved him from the disastrous consequences of a courage not backed up by ability. Joe even had slapped him on the back and called him old-timer once when leading him from a saloon in which the atmosphere was distinctly dangerous.

Not that Quint was ungrateful. He simply was feeling to the limit the thrill and attendant responsibility which enters the soul of a man raised from thirty-five dollars a month and grub, to fifty—without grub. It is a strange, inexplicable thrill, and one which arguiers for certain types of jobs long have decried as a delusion and a snare; yet it exists. Ordinary cowpunchers raised to the dignities of deputy-sheriffships probably were among the first Americans to discover and claim the distinction.

Quint watched his prisoner. He almost hoped that Joe Braden would leap up, bend the bars, and try to escape. A chap with the strength of Joe just about could spring the rods of soft iron. Quint resumed his pacing. Now and again he cleared his throat, stopped, schottisched to the right, and flipped out a gun toward a phantom foe. He did not try this with the weapon in the left holster as yet; time enough after he had practised the draw and a few snap shots with that iron.

Within the cell Joe Braden listened intently to the growing uproar at the nearest saloon. He smiled wryly. It could mean only one thing: a lynching, with himself as the vitally interested party. In an hour or less the liquor and arguments would do their work. He had many friends out there, but he knew how powerless a dampening minority invariably is when faced with the problem of stopping mob violence. A necktie party would organize; it never failed.

A hush, followed by an overwhelming din of unsorted shouts, told him of the final speeches. He had little time, and the walls of the cell were stout. Given a day and a night of unsupervised activity, and he might have won free. Now he had one

chance and no more; that chance was named Quint Greenwood.

The deputy paced back and forth. Occasionally he stopped to stare at the huddle of humanity within the cell. A few moments later he observed a startling thing. Joe Braden was down on the floor, writhing. He groaned, gasped; there was a queer, ultimate quality about both suppressed sounds which told the tender-hearted Quint instantly that his prisoner was near the point of extinction. He stared. Then of a sudden he ran to the front door, vented a yell which should have waked the dead—and, in fact, disturbed a Mexican who was grouching through a mescal headache on a stoop near by—and then ran back to the cell.

"Whatsamatter? What — " Quint gulped, thrusting his thin egg of a head half-through a pair of bars and looking at the convulsed lump of humanity there on the far side of the narrow cell.

"Get—a doctor!" gasped the sick man.

"They ain't none," wailed Quint, suddenly convinced that real trouble impended. "Say, what t' hell's wrong? Yuh ain't et nothin' except what I et."

Then he was fumbling with the big key which gave access to the spring lock. It opened. Quint strode across the cell, his Smith & Wesson out of the holster and leveled.

One glance at Joe dispelled all his fears of a stunt. The man was near death, and no mistake. Horrible convulsions wracked his frame. His face had purpled. He no longer could talk at all, though gasping, choking sounds emanated from thick-choked mouth and throat.

"Oh, tell me what's the matter," begged Quint, thoroughly distressed—as much by the impending death of his prisoner as by an honest sympathy for any human being submerged in such throes of suffering. "What can I do?"

"B-bend close!" bade the gasping whisper of the apparently dying man. "I need——"

What Joe Braden needed never was told in full. Of a sudden his arms shot out. The deputy's two pistols hurtled out of reach, and arms which wrenched the very breath out of Quint's lungs and diaphragm vised about his thin frame.

"Rabies! I have to—arrrgh!" growled Joe Braden, grinning over the deputy's shoulder even as he recalled the day, two months past, when a shrinking Quint had watched him cauterize with a poker a coyote bite on his forearm.

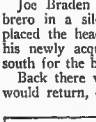
Then, while Quint's shrill screams of terror cleft the air, echoing from the cell walls, Joe Braden chuckled aloud, leaned close in spite of his captive's squirmings, and with many growls and teeth gnashings sank the tips of four front teeth lightly into the lobe of Quint Greenwood's left ear.

If the deputy howled quite as affrightedly as though a knife had been sunk almost through his ribs, Joe Braden did not care. The door was half-open. Taking Quint's filled cartridge belts and two Smith & Wessons, he gained the threshold, grinned, and disappeared. Quint was yowling around in a horror of something far more hideous than death.

The fact that before a half-hour had passed Quint summoned courage to chop off the lobe of that bitten ear entirely, only would have caused a guffaw of laughter to Joe Braden. As it was he did not know. Mounted upon the deputy's own half-broken buckskin, Joe was headed southward. At that moment, as he turned to look down upon Vierra from the southwestern ridge, a surging black smear of liquored humanity surged from the bars of Vierra and made for the jail. A man with a knotted and looped length of hemp led the way.

Joe Braden saw. He raised his sombrero in a silent hail and farewell, replaced the headgear, and turned to spur his newly acquired mount on the route south for the border of Mexico.

Back there was death, also love. He would return, claiming one or both.



TWO evenings later, in a Mexican border town, a swaggering *cholo* with considerable of a local reputation as a bad man and killer disputed the right of a dog of an *Americano* to waste money at the same roulette wheel he patronized. A name passed. The *cholo* whacked down his palm, intending to upend the pivoted half-breed holster at his hip.

But a quicker shot crossed the spinning wheel of fortune. For a moment the bad man rocked on his heels, vainly endeavoring to close his numbing right hand upon the butt of his revolver. Then, like a scarecrow from which the stake has been removed, he folded up in a sprawling huddle on the clay floor.

Joe Braden broke his weapon, thumbed in a fresh cartridge in place of the empty

shell, and let down the filed hammer gently.

"Back on the Gila," he observed indifferently to the stunned house man, an exiled Denver gambler, "Greasers learn better manners than that!"

From that moment they called him Gila Joe.

Chapter IV

BLACK COAT-TAILS

'LL blazin'-bang admit right off, stranger, that the Guzman Lake an' Casas Grandes gangs is stempestious, pizen mean, ef y'u tackle 'em all to once. Shore, they're the drainin's. Arizony an' New Mexico don't sewer out any worser blink-blank leetle devils, hoss-thieves an' the like. Mebbe a fair sprinklin' of blisterous, bowlegged *cholo* killers, who done slung knives too whem-gubblin' sudden-like, or spigged a .44 slug into another fella's back. Not akshel hi-yu gunmen like Jack Hostetter, Louie Wrenn, an' them. Nope. I got a notion about fellas y'u might call reg'lar, brimstone-seared, top-notch, A-1 killers—like Gila Joe, mebbe."

The stage driver stopped to swab off his sweated brow with a polka-dotted bandanna and then swirl out the length of a skinner's whip in a pistol-cracking reminder to the left lead mule, which exhibited a tendency to loaf. Thus occupied, he did not discern that one of the four passengers of the open, swaying coach straightened from the dejected slouch he had maintained all the way from Deming. Straightened, and bored the half-averted face of old Cussemout Crandall with black eyes which glinted an odd expectancy.

The driver orated mainly for his own edification, however. Ten miles of the dusty Florida Plains had jobbled by since two of his supposed audience had gone to sleep. The ennuied express messenger and a pair of unknown venturers into the dessicated range surrounding Tres Hermanas and the trigger-wise, cynical cowtown of Foley, constituted that audience—and the messenger spat frequent contempt for a declamation too familiar. Twenty times and more he had heard it all.

"Yeh," nodded the driver, as if someone had derided the probability of his ever having begun a mental process on his own, "I got a theery. It's this hyere. Most all hell-consecrated bad men hops the border one time or 'nuther, with Henrys or Winchesters dustin' up the heels of their cayuses, but on'y the real bad ones come back! The rest is plumb scairt; yella, y'u might say. It don't mean nuthin' to go, but it takes sulphur-cured, whing-diddled guts to come back. Now, y'u lookit thet limpin' lead-bender, Louie Wrenn——"

Old, garrulous Cussemout Crandall was launched upon a biography which would have served him till the southernmost of the Florida Mountains was passed far to the brassy west, unless interruption came. This time it arrived unexpectedly. The gaunt, white-bearded man in black who had faced away from Cussemout, tilted back the droopy, wide-brimmed hat of black felt which had masked his lined features, and turned sidewise and upward a pair of questioning, intense black eyes, eyes the more remarkable for their bushing of brows which met in a whitened bracket at the bridge of a strong, acciptrine nose.

"Pahdon the interruption, sah," broke in the stranger's voice, soft-modulated, courteous, yet with its chronic drawl hastened in spots as if with anxiety. "Ah thought you mentioned a name—Gila Joe? Was Ah mistaken? It seems Ah have heard something of a man by that handle. Gila Joe Harrison, perhaps?"

"Wrong!" sniffed Cussemout triumphantly. "Harrison was over'n Arizony. An' his name was Phil, too. He was hellious as all gitout, a reg'lar wazzpoodle at fannin' a six-gun. But he was kilt!" Cussemout voiced this epitaph with vociferous finality. Phil Harrison might have been a villain of the deepest dye, an exceedingly dangerous man, but he had committed the one unpardonable fault, that of being beaten to the draw by a rival gunman, Jack Hostetter. It did not matter at all that the redoubtable Jack had three filed notches in his left-hand gun, and eight in the grip of the right; Phil Harrison failed in his bid for immortality in that turbulent decade, by succumbing. Alibis, in that year of civilization, 1881 had not become fashionable.

Off went Cussemout on what might have been a complete summary of Phil Harrison's achievements and mistakes, each dictum liberally larded with the profanity, vulgarity and obscenity which gave Cussemout the only fame of his senescence; unprintable words exploded from his lips as easily as a man's-measure damn comes from an unseated buckaroo, and meant far less. This time the old driver had roused an interest which would not be denied,

however. Skilfully the goateed passenger led him back to the subject of Gila Joe. Joe what? If not Harrison, what was his handle? Was he a real killer, one of the daring few who had fled across the border only to return, bearding fate?

Truth to tell, Cussemout had the real biographer's spirit; he even recited the known facts concerning any living or local hero with reluctance. Gila Joe was very much alive, and for the time being, local. Still, the unaccustomed urge of a really interested audience was too much to resist. Weeks had passed since he had enjoyed any such thing. After a premonitory throat clearing or two, Cussemout forgot his fears. He held rather closely, for him, to the exact rumors he had heard, embellishing them surprisingly little. Still he gave a tale to his hearer worth recording, at least in brief.

Gila Joe Braden. That was the handle by which the gunman was known, though doubtless a dozen monikers would fit him as well. That was the way with killers. They tried to keep clear by shifting names, until two or three Territories knew their shooting. Then their reputations really grew. The old tales were resurrected one by one. They became beings apart.

This hellious, splendiferously-sacrificed son-of-a-one owned up to a previous address in southwestern Arizona. No one had questioned his reason for a change; since he came to the Florida Plains of New Mexico via the southern border, such a query seemed superfluous. Gila Joe was one of the few more daring outlaws who, finding Mexico distasteful, had flung a challenge in the teeth of law and order; had come back. Sometime a sheriff would come. That date would mean a square bordered in red ink upon the calendar kept by Tequila Toby, barkeep-proprietor of the shambling saloon known as the Cactus Spine.

Toby's calendar never was forgotten. Each monthly sheet, as it became outdated, was pasted in its place on the scarred wall. Within the hundreds of inked squares were scrawled curious names. Those men had died in fair fight within the confines of Foley. A newcomer, entering the bar, could read a summary of the community's lurid history at a glance. If he granted a close inspection, awe was apt to grow. No less than eight widely celebrated gunmen of the Southwest had shucked their six-guns here for the last time. Their names were scrawled indelibly in purple pencil, given to posterity by Toby's fat handwriting. And there were many more names, cognomens forgotten, chaff of the threshing.

F LATE Toby had adopted a new scheme. He credited the killer as well as debiting the killed. In parentheses the name of Gila Joe appeared thrice in the five months of his residence. Hartland Roth, Brett McAlester, and Digger Beck were the scrawled indelibles he had elected to Boot Hill. Nonentities, the first two, imitation bad men.

Digger Beck—well, he'd been the originator of the bandaged-hand gag, the plant by which a murderer carrying a derringer or other short weapon is enabled to shoot down an enemy while feigning to be crippled, or even pretending to be willing to shake hands. The range was well rid of Digger. In Luna County, where the office of sheriff went untenanted nearly half the time and outside officers bearing warrants or extradition were taken care of on general principles by almost any of the town skulkers they chanced to meet, several of the ranchers roundabout had sworn to ask no more than half an excuse for exterminating the man.

"Ah take it, then, that Gila Joe can hoe his own cohn, eh?" drawled the stranger, lapsing to his original position, and appearing oddly satisfied. "He isn't a right sociable cuss, one who'd drink a glass or two of Bourbon and forget about his guns?"

Cussemout snorted.

"Sociable!" echoed the driver, positively emphatic because he even forgot to utilize a single fragment of his lurid vocabulary. "No, not any! Huh, for ev'y word y'u kin get that hombre to say 'cept 'Uh-huh' or 'Nope'—not countin' the reg'lar poker callin's an' bumpin's, a-course—I'll buy y'u a brimmin' snoot of Toby's best red likker!"

"Done, suh," smiled the stranger, if a face as craggy as his ever might be said to smile. And there might be a question; his eyes did not mirror mirth. "When we reach town you'll allow me to handicap you two-three juleps, howsoevah. What you've done told me about Gila Joe is int'resting, plumb int'resting. Likewise all the rest about the calendah and the men's names. Ah shall enjoy my visit. But now, Ah do not mean to insult a new and valued friend on shoht acquaintance. You'll believe that, suh?" In the passen-

ger's hand, turned only toward Cussemout, appeared a wadded something which the driver looked at several seconds without recognizing. Then his short neck turned, projecting for all the world like that of a turkey buzzard—though old Cussemout Crandall possessed no other feature akin to the jet scavenger.

"Uh—aw!" he gaped, honestly astounded.

He had heard of such things, even believed in them theoretically. The dozing express messenger at his side at one time or another had been called upon to protect them, when safely locked in steel boxes and chained to the side stanchions of the stagecoach. Yet this was the first specimen of its exact denomination and kind Cussemout had glimpsed in his sixty-five years of range and desert life.

A banknote. More than that, a folded banknote bearing the unmistakable figure, 1000! Up to that moment the largest single piece of currency the stage driver ever had looked upon was the fresh-minted, glinting double eagle so prized in this land of hard money. In that second Cussemout guessed that the old stranger came from the East, and guessed wrong. He surmised that the white-goateed old duffer wished something illicit and dangerous put over, and surmised wrong.

At Gratagua Wells, a spot the incoming stage rarely made, the driver halted, unhitched the mules, and led them away for watering. At a distance of sixty feet he turned casually, saw that none of the other passengers evinced the slightest interest in the maneuver, then gestured swiftly with the curl of a puckered brown forefinger. The floppy black felt hat nodded briefly. Colonel Stephen Lassiter, once officer of an army of the Confederacy, descended stiffly. He limped toward the vestigial wells.

"Before I take your ding-willered, mammon-mothered money, stranger—" began Cussemout in a belligerent whisper.

A brief gesture, both dignified and commanding, stopped his objection. The old soldier spoke without preamble, laying the smoothed bill across Crandall's clenched fist, a fist which had been raised for a threat forgotten. Lassiter knew his man. He asked a simple service, one which Cussemout would have performed without pay and gladly enough for any man he called friend.

Still, one hundred dollars——

That evening they reached Foley. Lassiter hired a room above Mrs. Robison's restaurant and laundry, a building on the outskirts of town. Next door was a ramshackle saloon little patronized save by Mexicans and half-breeds; therefore exclusive enough to Americans who made known a desire for the best, and privacy. For reasons not disclosed to Cussemout save by indirection, Lassiter wished privacy for a few days.

After an hour or two of the newcomer's generous "handicapping," old Cussemout saw nothing at all peculiar in the hundred-dollar fee which he could earn so easily. At midnight, still with a stomach empty of food but otherwise as heavy as his head was light, the stage driver tried for a final burst of eulogy, fumbled his words, sat down, and went to sleep.

Lassiter tossed a handful of change on the bar without asking for further service. He reached beneath the long, black coattails, and brought up an ancient single-action revolver of such enormous length and weight of metal that the discreet bartender's eyes goggled. Why, the front sight on an iron like that'd gouge a guy's hind leg muscle! Gorry Treleaven, he of the once white apron, missed the odd fact that this ancient Spracklin five-shot possessed neither front nor rear sight.

Lassiter broke it ostentatiously, let it spew forth the five bulldog, .50 caliber cartridges, *pooh*ed three sharp exhalations down the double rifling, then thumbed in the cartridges again.

"You don't talk much?" he queried as if with deep meaning.

"Uh, nossir, *no*ssir!" answered Gorry hurriedly, and meant it.

Ignoring the stuttered invitation then to have a drink on the house, the first offered that evening, Lassiter thrust away the huge weapon, stooped, picked up the dried out body of Cussemout Crandall, and stalked away to the boarding-house run by the worthy Mrs. Robison.

CHAPTER V

THE SOAP BUBBLE BRAND

WHEN Lot Emery fought the last marauding Indian from his thirty-odd thousand acres of range in '72, the sinewy longhorns of his scrubby, half-wild herd submitted to a searing. Lot had notions. Somewhere or other he had read, as if it were a novel, a scuffed-up book called "Euclid Plane and Solid." How

much he understood remains a moot question, one we don't have to settle. From the plane portion of the volume, however, came his brand, later registered. It was a wild thing, even geometrically speaking —five circles, four of them tangential to a small circle in the middle. Buckaroos who didn't know Euclid from the "Egyptian Book of the Dead," dubbed the wild running iron creation the Soap Bubble. So it remained.

In '78 Lot won his red square at Toby's, owing to an attack of thumb paralysis in fanning. Squirrel Emery, Lot's son by his first wife, succeeded to the Soap Bubble. Squirrel was the man who introduced the stencil iron, and made it unpopular for some years, in southwestern New Mexico.

Squirrel won that cognomen because of his teeth. They projected, giving him an odd, mirthless grin along the narrow curves of his thin upper lip. He was a humorless thing, a man who eked out a whole existence upon the east side of the decimal point, seeing to it that the pennies grew up into dollars, then graduated. As they never atrophied again into dimes and nickels, he never saw them; but he was happy. His first official act as owner of the Soap Bubble was to re-register the brand. The five elaborate circles took up far too much hide on a steer, he thought. In 1880, a few months before the date of this story, the great ranch became known officially as the 5-0. Squirrel bought new stencil irons, with figures each about the size of a coyote track. All the calves and mavericks thenceforth were branded thus.

Squirrel's days of ranch ownership were growing short, though he was far from suspecting the fact. This night he had some cause for actual worry. Nine mornings earlier his semi-annual beef drive had started for Bender, the nearest railway loading station to the north. By noon of this Thursday, allowing thirty-six hours for a fast horse to cover the return distance, Gila Joe should have reached the ranch with the currency; and at sundown he had not yet appeared. The worried Squirrel, clicking outward the teeth of his retreating lower jaw in fear and anxiety, strained his eyes into the growing dusk from the top of Jackman's Ridge; and saw nothing. From this quoin of vantage eight miles of the rolling gramma grass range unfolded in its deepening shadow, yet plainly enough so that he knew with anguish that not even a single dust swirl marked the advent of the awaited horseman.

Twice or thrice Squirrel uttered queer, hateful sounds from his constricted throat. His green eyes blazed into the shadows below, often mirroring strange rednesses from the clouds haloing the sunken sun. A fear grew into certainty. What mattered it that once earlier he had waited in like manner for the coming of this gunman whom he trusted, yet suspected vilely at practically the same time? Squirrel owned a deep-seated shrewdness which stood him in good stead on all occasions save when he was alone. He could gauge men. His curse lay in the fact that once an individual escaped his vigilance and constant probing for a few hours, the whole process had to be renewed. Essentially dishonest himself, Squirrel could recognize honesty and contempt for underhandedness in others; but he could not believe his own judgment and *himself* for long.

A groan, full-throated, burst from his lips.

"Twenty thousand; it was too much for him! I was a fool!" he cried suddenly, flinging one tight-gauntleted fist toward the shadowing north. "Hell!"

By that he meant simply that Gila Joe Braden had been entrusted openly with the safety of the toiling herd in the northward drive; with eight Mexican vaqueros he was supposed to deliver the beeves to Ralph Scollay, buyer from Omaha, at the loading platforms in return for cash in hand. More than that; trusting the eight Mexicans not at all, Squirrel had instructed his foreman secretly. A fresh mount. A dash into the night. A hard ride with the box of currency bound to the horn of the saddle, and his two six-guns swinging clear, ready for instant use.

And now Gila Joe Braden, messenger and killer, was eight hours overdue.

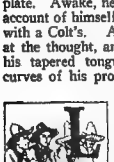
Forgotten was the cool, scornful glance of the gunman's eyes that had answered Squirrel's last voiced, agonized doubt. Forgotten the perils of the eighty mile ride across rough country where bandits more than occasionally plied their precarious professions, where bands of Apaches still had to be reckoned with; forgotten the presumed treachery of the *vaqueros* whose black-eyed sullenness Squirrel had interpreted as a readiness to raid the proceeds of this, his largest drive, if only a fair chance afforded. Money to the ranch owner was something more than the very juice of his lank, attenuated carcass. It was life itself. One severe money loss

easily might stop his heart, flinty as it seemed toward all other human emotions. And now such a loss threatened.

He cursed himself bitterly, and aloud, for dreading the peril of an ordinary currency shipment via Wells Fargo and the express messenger who accompanied Cussemout Crandall. True, that stage had been held up thrice during Squirrel's ownership of the ranch. The last time he had lost a key-wind hunter watch originally worth sixty dollars, a timepiece he had sent in by Cussemout for cleaning.

What was such a trifling loss beside this, however? A low, whining note fell from his bleak lips. Suddenly realizing that even if the awaited horseman were crossing the stretch of plains below at this minute he no longer could be discerned, Squirrel turned his rawboned mount toward the descending trail. He spurred, riding hard and recklessly upon the loose stone of the hillside. What was physical danger? He had to get back to the 5-0. He had to hear, or at least to know the rider still was missing.

As the cayuse slid and scrambled, often with stiffened forelegs, Squirrel cursed aloud in a frenzy. Why had he not gone with the drive? The answer to that was easy; he had feared to do so. His hold over the Mexicans was scant at best. Without a strong hand like that of Gila Joe, the riders would be far beyond his control. Several of them had flung low-voiced, snarling threats back at him at times when he failed to pay exactly on time, or when he reproved one or another of them for wastefulness. The possibilities of a knife thrust through his blankets at any night camp were far too gruesome to contemplate. Awake, he could render a sufficient account of himself, being nervously sudden with a Colt's. Asleep— He shuddered at the thought, and licked the pink tip of his tapered tongue across the snaggling curves of his projecting tusks.



LITTLE solace awaited. As he reined in the lathered chestnut before the stoop of the bunkhouse, and tore himself from his stirrups, more than one mouth behind its glowing cigarette was revealed in a grin.

"Not in yet. He'll get here, though—sometime, mebbe. Why worry?" Thus Snapper Downes, ordinarily shrill and peevish, now drawlingly enjoying every quaver of apprehension in the voice of his boss.

Snapper knew Gila Joe better than ordinary. With Lum Halle he shared the distinction of being the only other American puncher for the 5-0.

Squirrel whimpered and gnashed his teeth through a lonely supper. After toying with his steak and potatoes he leaped up suddenly, dived for the cubicle in which he kept all the ranch accounts as carefully as a ledger clerk, and spent the next hour and more alternating between feverish totalling and dashing out to blink his eyes unavailingly into the darkness of the northward trail.

No horseman appeared, and none came that night.

For the next three days, twenty thousand dollars supposedly lost because of the default of a man Squirrel had trusted were to cause the ranch owner more emotional stress than thrice that winning could have brought about in jubilation.

Few ranches managed at all like the 5-0 was run under Squirrel, ever lingered long in the Southwest. The 5-0 made itself an exception, largely because Squirrel possessed qualities usually foreign to real misers. He could plan, induce others to scrimp, fight the items of expense to absolute standstills. He actually had the cook baking lemon cream pies instead of the usual apple, in order to save the upper crusts.

Three days of hell for him now, however. They need not be exaggerated; not even dwelt upon. Save for the glee which brought grins to their faces every time the niggardly ranch owner left their company, the vaqueros and American riders would have deserted in a body. Squirrel was talking wildly. If Gila Joe did not come back he would cut wages in half until the amount were repaid. He would sue the town of Foley for allowing such a bad hombre to remain at large. He—but it was all feverish, half-crazy stuff, more food for the grinning derision of the bunkhouse.

Though at first every man jack, white or brown, believed in the honesty of Gila Joe, only one day had to pass before the entire outfit was wishing the foreman God-speed toward Medicine Hat, Mexico City, or whatever point he chose as his destination. With those men behind the glowing cigarettes Gila Joe was a huge and delightful comedy. Each rider dwelt eloquently upon what he would have done had the same chance been offered to him.

QUIRREL EMERY neither combed his hair nor slept. He did not bathe. The white tie about his gray cotton shirt collar came awry; its triangle knot canted over, two inches below its original position. The shirt tore open at the neck. Squirrel did not know. He was whining like a sick coyote now, running back and forth, jerking out his guns and shaking them, mouthing half-words horrible in their suggestion of a mind slipping from its balance. If nothing happened he would not remain sane.

The eleven remaining riders judged him even now crazy as a loon. They ceased to mock. All of them rode quietly to Foley, there to await the denouement. They drank, and discussed the man in voices that started at whispers, but which reached general recognition all too soon. In his scarred armchair beside the door a black-clothed oldster overheard a name. He stiffened. A moment later he lounged up to the bar, bought three drinks running for a half-breed he never had met and whom he might disallow as even an acquaintance on next meeting.

This was the odd traveler who had outlasted Cussemout Crandall in their drinking bout, the strange newcomer who every now and then lifted from the depths of his hip an awesome weapon the like of which never had been seen in this part of New Mexico, blew through the barrel, and rethumbed the stocky cartridges. Looking for someone, they said of him. Well, what of it? Toby would have fun inking in another red square some day.

Cussemout himself came in. He spread his arms and whooped. Across the length of the bar he caught a pair of black, imperative eyes shrouded close by white, bushy brows. Of a sudden the stage driver stopped, stared, and became docile. He took his drink like one in a trance. Then he sidled over to this stranger he had come to admire so greatly.

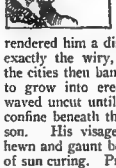
"What the hell y'u mean?" he whispered raucously. "It shore takes a begroggled, hoof-whiffin' he-man to frown thetaway at me!"

The black-garbed stranger lifted one forefinger to his lips. Cussemout subsided, staring and drinking. He didn't care much. Silence gave him that much more leeway for whisky, and he liked his parties unhandicapped. The old duffer was O. K. Let him have his fun.

The man at Cussemout's side drank only mechanically and at long intervals. The news he was hearing of Gila Joe Braden and the latter's employer, Squirrel Emery, altered every previous plan.

CHAPTER VI

THE RATTLER



SEEMING harshness of fortune had kept Gila Joe Braden from becoming what women call handsome. Therein the hardships and reasons to hate which had fallen to him had rendered him a distinct service. His hair, exactly the wiry, rebellious sort men of the cities then banded at night and trained to grow into erect, crinkly pompadours, waved uncut until it became impossible to confine beneath the sweat band of a Stetson. His visage thrust outward, rough hewn and gaunt beneath its coppery layers of sun curing. Prominent cheekbones, enhanced by hollows in the fleshless cheeks below, lent his countenance an odd semblance to that of an Apache, a suggestion which ended exactly there. A curling brown mustache two or three shades lighter than his hair, and a pair of hazel eyes, the irises of which were flecked with tiny spears of gold in a most curious fashion, denied any trace of Indian blood.

At the start of this cattle drive he had laughed shortly, that chilling, mirthless cachination which men distrusted in him even more than his far less infrequent frown.

"What if I should take a notion to walk over to the bunkhouse, Emery, and spill your fine plan? Think the boys would like it right well?"

The rancher started. He still was the calculating, long-headed miser, however. "Don't talk nonsense, Joe," he reproved sharply, though with a side glance of apprehension. "You are to bring back Scollay's payment intact; that's all need concern anyone. Only a fool would want eighteen or twenty thousand dollars on the trail longer than necessary. I trust my men, yes. You in particular. The Mexicans have to have their day or two in the *cantinas* of Bender after the drive. You couldn't think of waiting, naturally. When that gold is locked in the safe yonder—" he paused to gesture toward the room he utilized as an office—"the fifty-dollar bonus is yours. The Mexicans get

paid their five dollars apiece extra, in Bender."

Though Gila Joe agreed to follow instructions, mainly because the dilapidated rail town of Bender offered little in shape of amusement for any save the *vaqueros*, he did not share Squirrel's apprehensions. The place of a foreman on the 5-0 necessarily was that of a driver of men, uncompromising, iron-fisted and fearless. Thus far, owing to the several glimpses Foley had had of him through gun smoke, Gila Joe's orders had been obeyed with fair consistency.

Even Snapper and Lum, his only two associates at the ranch, drifted along quite content with such dictatorship. It made their job easier; during eight months, though other ranches had suffered occasional raids from rustlers, the 5-0 whitefaces were left severely alone. That eliminated completely night picketing and many a long, arduous pursuit of cattle-thieves. Snapper and Lum, though able to take their own parts well enough at a showdown, essentially were men of peace.

On the drive to Bender, the placid, unhastened Herefords gave no tronble. Well fattened, brought each night to water and forage grass, the thoroughbreds plodded on as tranquilly as sheep. Nothing short of dynamite or a wind storm with lightning could make them stampede, and at this season of the year New Mexico rarely sights a cloud. Gila Joe had no worries concerning them. Two of his Mexicans, spelling each other, were sufficient to ride the edge of the herd, watching for a possible night marauder, a lobo or catamount come for a fill of the tender beef.

One hundred-odd dogies, nearly the last of those half-wild stringy steers which Squirrel Emery had been replacing gradually with blooded stock for several years, caused ten times the trouble of the larger herd. Many of the animals were tough old round-up dodgers, veterans of many a season on the range untroubled by rope or branding iron, brought at last toward their respective fates as impermeable roasts and beefsteaks. Their wits were sharper. They objected strenuously to being driven in any direction and gave constant annoyance to the *vaqueros*. Twice at night they broke away without reason, requiring furious riding on the part of Gila Joe and his men to forestall a successful break for liberty and the resulting long combing of an unfamiliar range.

Though Gila Joe let the *vaqueros* ride herd in their turn, four of them spelling in pairs for the harder task of holding together the milling, uneasy longhorns, he did not spare himself. From the first night to the last of the drive, at least once or twice a night, he was out of blankets, full-dressed in an instant through the simple process of pulling on his spurred boots, and riding hell bent to the assistance of one or another of the Mexicans. Often, when the shots and yells of the riders betokened serious trouble, he routed out the off-duty riders and the two detailed to the camp as cook and guard over the small cavvy of mounts, much to the muttered anger of the men thus snatched from their rest.

THE ranch foreman knew well that two troublemakers were numbered among the eight Mexicans. Whereas six of the men were unimportant, *vaqueros* who could be dangerous with knife or gun under the right leadership but ordinary enough Mexicans otherwise, Pasquale DeMattos—a lowering eighth-breed whose scrambled and unknown ancestry probably contained blood from Southern Europe as well as some Mexican and the tinge of American Indian—and the man who twice had fought Pasquale, though indecisively, and who now called himself Juan Sanchez, were of a different stamp.

Squirrel Emery had discharged them both before Joe took up his duties. The foreman, confronted by a gibe from the swaggering Juan which could be answered only in two ways, chose instantly to rehire them. They did their work. And though for some weeks Pasquale bristled and grew stiff at each peremptory order, Juan seemed satisfied with a subordinate leadership of the *vaqueros*. Insensibly both accepted Gila Joe, or seemed to do so.

With Juan, who did not lack courage for all his braggadocio, this simply was a common sense estimate of a border gunman just then considered the fastest living exponent of the art of six-gun drawing and fanning. The *vaqueros* watched Gila Joe Braden in two sudden combats; then Juan smiled bluffly whenever the foreman gave him orders. Sometime, at some place, he might like to kill the damned *Americano*, but not just now—not in an even break. That was sure! Juan, in his way, was something of a philosopher, perhaps. He herded the longhorns, or dozed in his sad-

die on the patrol of the white-faces, and thought of the trip back.

Much gold would accompany Braden. Ah! Was there not some way in which this payment, larger by one-fourth than the last drive to Bender, could be attached for a better use? Squirrel Emery needed no more. For Juan such a lump sum would mean a return in state to a certain section of Chihuahua in which his name was not held in the proper respect. There he had failed with a sloe-eyed señorita, after boasting through many glasses of tequila of her enormous dowry and his coming independence and happiness.

With twelve or fifteen thousand round American dollars of silver—he rather underestimated the worth of these Herefords, counting them as dogies—he could buy out a small *rancho*, live thereafter in peace and luxury like a don, and bring to green envy the buxom coquette who had jilted him. Her marshmallowy high clerk of the dictator's régime would go out with the first revolution; probably he would die. With many lovely women around him in his great hacienda, Juan then would wave a hand languidly. The gesture would mean that the bereaved woman could have accommodations on Juan's broad estate, a hut to herself, perhaps, and a peon to see that she did not starve. By-and-by he might even demean himself to ride by, perchance stop——

Other aspirations less picturesque moved the mind of his associate, Pasquale. Out of many plans for the attachment of that same gold had come a definite idea. Eighteen miles to eastward of Bender lay Carolus, a town that served as rail head for an adjoining range. With Gila Joe Braden out of the way, and Juan knifed or bullied into submission, it would be easy enough to drive the beeves to Carolus; the other Mexicans would shrug, take their small splits of the booty, and ride away. Cattle buyers were at every rail town during this season. High prices were being paid.

Gila Joe himself was the stumbling block. Several men had paid the extreme penalty for the folly of attempting to exterminate him. Pasquale's swarthy countenance grew wry at the thought of open combat and its inevitable result. No. A superstition held current amid the Mexican population of Foley; Gila Joe was tough like an old range lobo. Even if mortally wounded he would kill the man who killed him. Like a wolf shot in mid-leap, yet which slashes with bare fangs in a concentration of fiendish abandon not to be halted easily even by death, he would draw that six-gun somehow; and the single-action would spout death unerringly.

Pasquale was not inclined specially toward prudence, yet he shivered, sucking jerkily at his sweetened cigarette. There was something odd about it. He looked forward to ordinary combat with gusto; but not to this speculative affair. Without doubt this would have to be murder, and murder of a special kind. No suspicion. A stroke in the back, perhaps. Better, a coup which if understood would seem to point to Juan. Ten minutes of fast-burning cigarettes and many scowlings. Then Pasquale laughed aloud, flinging high above his sombrero the glowing butt of his cigarette. He had it!

That afternoon, the sixth of the drive, he acted very queerly. He found a three-foot rattler, and called upon Juan and another of the *vaqueros* to help capture it. He did not want it killed. Back at Foley was a fool of an *Americano* who had offered twenty-five good dollars for such a reptile with rattles and button intact. The prospective buyer was afraid to go out and capture the snake alive. Pasquale sympathized. He did not see how such a prize could be taken back to Foley without grave danger.

Juan sneered. Not stopping to consider that, if certain plans he had formulated came to maturity, there would be no opportunity to cash in upon the snake, he shouldered Pasquale aside with nasty remarks concerning the latter's brand of courage. Juan caught the rattler in his own blanket—just as he was scheduled to do. He pursed the edges of the blanket, tying them with rawhide, then nonchalantly slung the writhing bundle over the horn of his saddle. The snake might smother or starve before it could be delivered to the tenderfoot, but Juan had demonstrated his courage. Let the pifling *cholo* beware!

The bundle had become quiet by night. Juan slept, snoring vociferously, his head against a stunted upgrowth of evergreen oak. This night Pasquale had no thought of sleep. His shadowed figure appeared. He reached for the bundle resting beside Juan's still form. In ten stealthy minutes the blanket bag had vanished, was retied strangely and insecurely with the slick-sweated hand-hold of a riata, and placed silently beside the foot of the blanket-shrouded huddle that was Gila Joe.

Pasquale punched the muscled coils beneath the cloth. They squirmed savagely.

To his strained ears came the faint, almost inaudible *chik-a-chik-a-chik* of the angered reptile. Pasquale grinned—and went from there. In his hand, as he bent above the chaparral, was the loop end of the riata.

He tugged gently. The prepared knot gave in silence. A flick of the rawhide. It mounted, spiralled down. Pasquale gathered it and fled. In a few seconds he was in his own blankets, snoring lustily. Released from its covering, a very incensed bull rattler just then was writhing its way from the confining, smothering blanket.

CHAPTER VII

VENOM

IN THE dreamless slumber of the great outdoors Gila Joe lay wrapped. The harsh, incessant striving, which began with the false dawn and ended when the last reddish refractions from the west proved insufficient to light the task of pouring cigarette tobacco into a quilled brown paper, had tired him thoroughly. He did not snore. His generous nostrils flared and subsided with each of the slow drawn, deep inhalations. He lay fully dressed except for his boots, the blanket to his chin. Beneath the woolen folds his right forearm lay across his abdomen, right thumb hooked beneath the single cartridge belt, within four inches of the sagging, left-hand gun. Surprised at night, Gila Joe drew only this one weapon; he had found from experience that he could not rest in comfort with the bulge of a right-hand holster beneath his thigh.

A crouching, sinister shadow glided out from the star-lit chapparal, stopped a moment near his feet, then disappeared again, looping out something which hung in circles from his left wrist. Long seconds ensued, broken only by a pettish, nasal yelp from some distant, hungry coyote, and the faint intermittent rustle of a chill night wind in the scrub.

Then a twitching of the thing which lay along the ground. A silent unthreading of a rawhide knot. A muscled remonstrance from something within the bundle, a rattler which unaccountably found freedom within its grasp after hours of intense discomfort and goaded fury.

The snake slid halfway from the blanket which belonged to Juan. The cooling air smote it, brought it to a stop. The flat head raised. The double tongue darted forth and back in excited anger. The jaws parted. Fifty times and more it had sunk these needle pointed, oozing fangs in the unresponsive blanket. Now the smell of man was perceptible; revenge was near. With the blanket folds still deadening the warning *chik-a-chik-a-chik* of the agitated rattles, the snake wriggled in the darkness straight for the recumbent form of the man. It found a fold of the blanket, flowed in like a column of black quicksilver, found warm flesh—and recoiled. Fifteen seconds later the fangs sank deep.

GILA JOE awoke with the first touch of that chill, scaly skin against the warmth of his elbow. He did not start; moved nothing but his eyelids and the corners of his wide mouth. Without turning to examine, he knew. There within the loose fold of his blanket was deadly peril, doubtless the diamond-backed rattler, chief of all the reptiles who are indigenous to the range and desert. With a mind that raced too fast for seconds he recalled tales of just this happening; how cowpunchers, sleeping under the stars, had moved restlessly, not suspecting the reason of their discomfort. The evil-tempered snake, striking—and death almost before even the deadly nature of the bite was comprehended.

With tiny shivers coursing his frame as they brought forth gooseflesh, Gila Joe nevertheless controlled his muscles. He moved without delay, yet surely and swiftly. Upon his left hip hung a holstered single-action. Cautiously he lifted this from the leather, then brought up his left hand outside the blanket.

That instant the rattler struck. With a quick motion Gila Joe brought over the weapon till it pointed slanting downward. He covered a bulge immediately above the burning pain on his right forearm, and pulled the trigger. The lead slug tore through the woolen fibers of the blanket, caught the malevolent rattler fairly between the glassy, lidless eyes, and then tore three inches of vertebrae from their attachment to the skull. The snake writhed up in the muscular convulsions of death. Gila Joe tossed it from him with the blanket, and sat erect, crossing his legs like a Turk.

First he ripped from his waist the black silk sash which was a memento of days across the border. This he rolled into a thin cord. Drawing the knot with his teeth, he formed a slipknot just above his elbow, and drew this tight with all his strength. Then he jerked out from its side sheath in his right boot the razor-edged bowie he utilized for shaving, slit a deep cross through the two fang marks he could not see, but which burned in a fiery telltale, and then set his strong, even teeth an inch apart outside the double wound. Thrice he sucked and spat. Then he arose.

"Pasquale!" he called imperatively, his stentorian voice sweeping the silent camp like a promise of doom.

In his couch upon the dry ground a Mexican heard and cowered, thumbing the circle of beads at his throat. It seemed that Gila Joe knew. If then the poison did not work quickly——

"Pasquale! Juan! Ramon!"

Every other man in camp save the first named rolled out hurriedly, for Gila Joe sounded hoarse as if from anger. Shivering, holding a single-shot derringer trained toward the awakening group, Pasquale alone did not answer.

The others came, Juan among the first. He did not dream, of course, of the trouble. When Gila Joe demanded whisky or any other quick stimulant in their possession, Juan shrugged. How could any of them be expected to carry liquor? Long since any must have been drunk.

"Bueno," nodded Gila Joe impassively. He arose, went to the ashes of the campfire, kicked them into a glow, and sat down. "Bring more wood," was all he said.

If the whispering Mexicans saw the impromptu tourniquet, then found the shattered rattlesnake, it seemed no concern of his. He sucked once more at the freely bleeding wound, then gave it little more apparent attention. Before the mounting fire he sat for a space of minutes, tending the wound which did not seem to threaten serious trouble.

Gila Joe, loosening the tourniquet for the tenth time, took it off. His forearm was swelled only slightly more than if the sting of a yellowjacket had struck into the muscle fibers. He waited erect, massaging the half-numb member, clawing out and clenching the long, lean fingers.

"Better than liquor!" he decided with grim satisfaction. It was evident that for some occult reason—really because the rattler had exhausted his virulence previously upon the blanket—Gila Joe was not to suffer greatly.

"No rattlesnake could kill you," came the deep voice of Juan, speaking in Spanish. "Am I not aware of this? Look. I slept. The snake I had captured to bring to the Señor Menzies was he who tried in vain to slay."

That was nervy of Juan; Gila Joe acknowledged the fact. A few minutes' consideration made psychologically plain that Juan had not performed this stunt. Until the evidence of the blanket was brought to his eyes, Gila Joe had not considered the occurrence more than an accident. Now he whistled low between his two lower front teeth. Someone had tried to kill him!

There was no novelty in the thought; only in the method. He came erect on his feet, crouching. Nothing menaced instantly. He reached down and secured the second belt, strapped it on the other diagonal of his waist line.

"So somebody—was lookin' for me?"

"Si. It mus' have been—" but Juan was pushed aside.

In that instant something more than a modicum of knowledge had come to Gila Joe. Only one man of the camp had failed to answer his call for help. That *vaquero,* Pasquale, was one of the two with whom conclusions had threatened. He was the only man of four who had not awakened! Pasquale ought to be questioned; that was plain.

Gila Joe strode directly for the huddle of greasy cloth which concealed the Mexican. In the faint moonlight Pasquale saw him coming, raised rigidly, then yelled aloud his terror and superstition. As he yelled he flung up the bulldog derringer—at too great a range for accuracy with that short-barreled weapon. It blazed its single shot, and the heavy slug flicked the hair of Gila Joe's chaparejos.

The ranch foreman stopped. Left-handedly he drew and fired in a single motion. The tensed figure of the Mexican scrabbled, soughed wheezingly, fell kicking—shot through the Adam's apple. In five minutes he lay still.

"Dig his grave right there; use your knives," bade Gila Joe unemotionally. "You'll all bear witness he shot first." And with that he returned to his blankets.

"Dios!" breathed one of the Mexicans. But Juan only squinted, shrugging in deeper acknowledgment and calculation. The superstition concerning Gila Joe evidently was just enough.

CHAPTER VIII

STRATEGY

ON THE morning of the second day following, Gila Joe, with his seven remaining *vaqueros*, dusty and begrimed from the long drive, hazed in the two herds of cattle. Ralph Scollay, the cattle buyer, still was busied at the loading pens. He shook hands with Gila Joe, inspected the Herefords and dogies in a cursory round, and nodded satisfaction with the steers. They were in far better condition than the bulk of animals he had purchased that week. They were run through the pens for count, estimate and loading; then, without haggling on either Scollay's or the foreman's part, Squirrel Emery received one cent more than the asking price he had stipulated.

The bargain was concluded quickly. Since Scollay's word was known to be his bond, Gila Joe simply shook hands once more, then rode to the ramshackle hotel for the head-to-foot wash and refreshments he needed sorely. The gold would be brought to him before dark. Since Squirrel Emery's specifications demanded an immediate trip along the back trail, Gila Joe bathed in a tub of unheated water, changed his undergarments, washed those he removed, then stretched out full length on a lumpy cot which seemed as soft as down to him. Almost instantly he was asleep, with the rather unreliable clock of his mind set for an awakening at sundown.

Actually he jerked awake twice, certain that dusk had come, only to view the sun little lowered from its midday position. Grimacing in impatience, for he was tired enough to sleep the clock around, and his poisoned arm throbbed as though an aneurism lay beneath the skin, he snapped shut the lashes of his eyes the first time. On the second occasion he saw something curious. The door of his chamber, which he had left unlocked, had closed noiselessly!

Like a big cat he reached his feet, hesitated a fraction of a second to make certain of the loads in one six-gun, then swung open the flimsy pine rectangle. He was just in time to see the spurred heel of a riding boot disappear at the top of the stairway. From there came the clinking steps of a man who had descended without especial attempt at caution.

Gila Joe did not follow. He vanished back in his room like one possessed, threw up the sash of the single window. Eight feet below slanted the lean-to roof of the kitchen. Swinging out his long legs, he held and dropped to his toes. Four swift strides down the slanting planks, a left hand upon the uneven eaves, and he vaulted the five feet to the dusty ground.

Thirty seconds later he was seated nonchalantly on the top rail of the horse corral in the rear, busily engaged in rolling a brown paper cigarette. From the side entrance of the rambling frame building a Mexican emerged—Juan Sanchez! The *vaquero* came briskly, assurance in his gait and swagger. Long laid plans were going to work out perfectly, it seemed.

For some minutes, days in fact, Juan had wondered if the foreman actually would be fool enough to wait until his *vaqueros* had their fill of town, then ride back to the southward in their company. Of course, Gila Joe feared no one, nothing; that furnished the explanation. He most evidently had given himself to sleep and a recuperation from his snake wound, anticipating no trouble. Well, the first night out——

That instant Juan stopped, goggled. His breath came into his lungs sharply, and stopped there. He stepped back one pace. There on the corral fence, engaged in lighting a refractory brown paper cigarette, and lounging with the complete ease of an idler who has nothing to do for the rest of a day, was Gila Joe, whom Juan had glimpsed stretched out in what had seemed the deepest slumber in an upstairs room not more than seventy seconds earlier!

The Mexican resumed breathing with difficulty. He strode around the corner of the hotel, then peeked back. Gila Joe still was there. It surely looked as though he was there to gossip with the incoming riders who would plan to stay all of Saturday night, dancing, drinking and gambling. Probably he was intent upon matching up with some friend he hoped or expected to see.

Juan felt shaken. He put little trust in ordinary superstitions, yet Gila Joe was far different from the ordinary run of demons a man had to take on faith. One could look at Gila Joe; shoot at him, if one was foolish enough to try it in fair combat. Still he was hard, most hard to understand! That snake was large enough to have killed any man; yet Gila Joe apparently—and without even a drop of alcoholic liquor or other medicine!—had thrown off the menace with almost no dis-

comfort. That was in line with the tales of those who said he had sold his soul to the Evil One and in exchange had received an immunity to lead and to poison.

Juan thought he had been mistaken, had looked into the wrong upstairs chamber. Still, he was not quite convinced. Instead of going out toward the stables to converse with the two *vaqueros* he had chosen as his conspirators, he turned sharply into the front entrance of the hotel, braved the frown of the proprietor who believed strongly in having Mexicans enter and leave through the side or back, and purchased a sack of tobacco at the cigar counter. Then Juan sidled away. A moment later he was climbing the stairs three at a time.

At No. 4, where he had thought Gila Joe slept, Juan cautiously turned the knob. The door opened without sound. Juan peeked. There on the bed, stretched out identically as he had been before, was a man; and after a short scrutiny Juan Sanchez knew without the shadow of a doubt that the man was Gila Joe Braden!

The black hair rose on Juan's scalp, prickling at every separate root. He backed away. The door, closed ineffectually, creaked on its hinges as it swung open again. Juan did not heed. He crossed himself thrice as he sped for the lower floor, nor thought even to look again at the double of this queer man who had sat and smoked upon the corral rail.

The net result of it all was that Gila Joe, moved at last from his feeling of contemptuous security, watched all the Mexicans. For two hours he discovered little. When Scollay came, personally carrying the gold and the receipt blank for Gila Joe to sign, there were two of the *vaqueros* in sight most of the time. They could not dissemble their interest well enough to fool him now.

The gold came in a lock-box. Gila Joe bought the box itself for two dollars. He shook hands with Scollay in a businesslike farewell, looked about his room with an odd expression in his eyes, and then performed an action which Juan Sanchez would have given his slim hopes of salvation to have witnessed. Ten minutes later, with the awkward box hidden partially by his poncho, Gila Joe made his way to the stable in which he had left his mount and saddle. There quickly he made a deal for another cayuse, arranging to have the Mexicans bring home his own favorite with the members of their own cavvy.

"I'm ridin' fast an' straight," he told the stable man. "I want a hoss that can do sixty a day without founderin'."

"Yo' done got one," assured the lackey, nodding toward the unimpressive bay which stood shamblingly as Gila Joe adjusted the saddle cinch and bridle.

The man gave one flirt to the pony's lower lip, exposing long teeth, yellowed, sure symptoms of age in the supposedly fast mount. For some reason Gila Joe, who knew horses, did not protest. He grinned, vaulted astride, lighting as easily as a cat upon a carpet, and rode away. Ten seconds after his departure with the poncho and box strapped to his saddle horn, the livery stable boy darted to the back door. With a saddle blanket held like a signal flag, he made curious sidewise arcs. These caused a window in the hotel to slam suddenly.

A MILE sufficed for the ancient cowbait to exhibit all of his gaits, two in number. He walked stiff-legged, something like an animated Noah's Ark on stilts. Or he galloped wheezingly. Never in the years of a life spent in the Southwest had Gila Joe sat through any violent pace with so little forward progress to it as that gallop. The Inchworm, as he immediately christened the veteran, had a measuring motion; when extending his forelegs it seemed necessary to bring up the two rear hoofs to clicking interference before the front ones could move again. Combining occasional hundred yard gallops with wearisome stretches of the shambling, jolting walk, Gila Joe left the main trail, which would have taken him back toward the 5-0 with least delay, and cut across a wide, low mesa toward a four-mile-distant butte.

"Funny place to go, ol' Inchworm," he remarked aloud, slapping his sombrero across the animal's ears, "but a sort o' hunch is ridin' my tail. An' maybe that ain't all, either. Why d' y'u s'pose they handed me a thing like y'u? Ain't the credit of the 5-0 good for a real, shore-enough hoss any more? Why was that damn Juan so anxious to find out if I still was there? It wasn't on account o' what I got in this-hyar box; no, it shorely wasn't."

He laughed grimly, as at some joke the rickety old bay could not be expected to understand. Up on the mesa, however, Gila Joe made no attempts at speed. In-

stead, he lounged with left knee hooked about the horn of the heavy stock saddle, and watched through the dimming light of evening the rim of the mesa to the rear. When a faint cloud of dust appeared there, he grinned, nodded, and for the first time spurred his mount.

"Got to measure off another two-three miles, Inchworm," he explained. "It'll be dark then."

In the shelter of the sloping butte, where clusterings of evergreen oak suited his purpose, the man dismounted and unsaddled. Oddly he cached the accoutrements and all his spare effects, except the blanket and the steel lock-box. With these articles, plus his boots and sombrero, Gila Joe made magic of a sort which forever would consolidate as firm beliefs in one Mexican certain uneasily grounded suspicions of demonology.

SUFFICIENT light still showed the trail to Juan and his two *vaquero* conspirators; the three puzzled over the tracks of old Inchworm. Without doubt, because this veteran animal was shod with cast-off mule shoes in front, these were the tracks made by Gila Joe's mount. Why had the foreman left the main trail? Was he making for the long, roundabout route on the western side of the Floridas?

In gutturals the three discussed this unforeseen development. Juan was more worried than either of his two henchmen, for this leader had been canny enough to keep to himself all his growing suspicion of Gila Joe's dual and diabolic personality. Time enough for talk of that when the gold was in Juan's possession.

"He will not travel far. Night comes, and the horse will play out," advanced one of the *vaqueros*. "Will he make a fire, *muchacho*? Here on the mesa there is no water, and the fire would show many miles."

"Who can tell?" grunted Juan.

When afar off to their left a tiny point of light sprang into being, a triple-tongued chorus of throaty exclamations greeted it, however. With the descent of night they had been undecided whether to ride further on or to camp till dawn. The beacon—a fire which *had* to belong to Gila Joe, since no one else rode this barren mesa—gave them an abrupt decision. This was luck!

Juan could not delegate the task that confronted him. It was his alone, if he could gain the complete ascendancy over the pair of *vaqueros* he felt to be necessary for a successful consummation. He bade them creep up, well in his rear. Only in case something slipped were they to interfere. Juan silently whetted his razor-edged bowie along the palm of one dark hand. *Theeck-thieeek* came the almost inaudible *tingg* of the balanced blade upon the double row of calluses.

Slowly he crept forward upon all fours.

The chaparral gave him excellent cover. Within twenty yards, he saw how beautifully matters had shaped themselves for his purpose. Gila Joe, probably eating only a handful of dried meat and tortillas, already had rolled up in his blanket. The foreman must have been nearly dead with fatigue, for there beyond the fire Juan saw the sombrero and boots of Gila Joe projecting from the blankets.

Juan grinned. It would be too easy! With the bowie pointing backward as his fist touched the ground, the Mexican circled noiselessly and swiftly. Now only a clump of the scrub oak separated him from his victim. He edged about with extreme care, holding his breathing to a slow, even rate in spite of the unaccountable bounding of his pulses. A constriction of fear assailed his dry throat, though curiously the saliva lay in beadings of foam between his thick lips. Would the killer demon squirm beneath the bite of the steel like a common man? Or would he rise, mortally wounded, and slay his murderer, as the legends foretold? Juan quailed momentarily.

Then the knowledge came that back there in the scrub two *compañeros* watched him wide-eyed and shivering, men whom Juan now fondly contemplated impressing as a nucleus of a bandit gang of which he would be the swaggering chieftain. There could be no backing out now. Another yard. A foot. Six inches more. No sound came from the huddle of blankets. Juan saw that Gila Joe must be lying flat on his stomach. The knife raised. Emitting the full of a contained breath in a sudden gusty yell of triumph over fear, Juan brought the blade squarely toward the point he judged must be the hollow between the shoulder blades.

That second many things happened. A chill of sheer, utter horror paralyzed the Mexican; his knife, cutting through the layers of blankets, passed on through and

sank deep in the earth, only a skeleton of wiry mesquite branches opposing in the space thought to be occupied by the slumbering carcass of Gila Joe! Juan's yell of triumph dribbled to a gargling whinny, ceased. He stared down at the flattened roll, his dull mind unable to grasp more than the instinctive fear engendered by finding this demon absent.

With the flash of the blade a tall, corded figure rose to a crouching position behind and between the pair of *vaqueros* who watched the supposed murder with bated breath. Two lean, powerful hands went forth, closed upon two windpipes. The Mexicans started, writhed, but made no sound that Juan could hear in that moment. Up they rose, lifted by those sinewy arms, which likewise propelled them, suffocating, toward the back trail. Of a sudden Gila Joe turned sidewise, letting the man he clutched with his left hand sag behind. Then he swung like a spring door slamming shut. The gasping, terrified *vaquero*, propelled fifteen feet, dove head first into the poisonous embrace of a prickly pear. And a second later a heavy body, that of his comrade, struck the diabolical cactus just above him.

Then Juan, mumbling funny, skittering sounds, wrenched forth the bloodless knife and crouched, looking terrifiedly about him. He had heard something——

And there, on the other side of the dying fire, standing with his thumbs hitched in his belts and a saturnine expression upon his elongated countenance, was Gila Joe Braden!

Chapter IX

TULLY PASSES

QUIRREL EMERY, owner of the Soap Bubble, was in a condition closely approaching dementia. Lack of sleep, and an uncertainty—now grown to horrid, pessimistic certainty—concerning the proceeds of his cattle drive, had driven him frenzied, slavering. To save himself a sum of money no greater than five or six hundred dollars, he had placed in jeopardy, had *lost*, twenty thousand or more! What a fool, what a consummate nincompoop he had been to believe that Gila Joe, a noted gunman, was honest simply because he scorned the practice of small scale chicanery. Doubtless, by now Gila Joe was far back over the line, gambling and frittering away in Mexican resorts the gold rightfully belonging to Squirrel Emery. When Squirrel thought of his own gullibility, his lips retracted in a whining snarl almost falsetto in its poignant quality, and his long, yellow incisors clicked together in a mincing, wrathy multitude of fruitless bites.

The story of the tragic result of the ranchman's penny wisdom, pound foolishness was unknown outside his own narrow-gauge though scheming mind. Foley now had no bank. In fact, there was none nearer than the very railway town toward which Gila Joe and the *vaqueros* had driven the cattle, owing to an unfortunate circumstance. That happening was the defalcation of the cashier of the Foley Cattlemen's Trust. The fleeing embezzler now had been gone two years. For that length of time the Foley institution had remained locked and silent; its stockholders long since had given up hope of salvaging more than a few cents on the dollar for their shares. The reimbursement would take place when the slow assets were cashed, and the building and fixtures sold.

Squirrel Emery thus far was the only prospective purchaser of the latter, and he knew it. By nature, if not by training, better fitted for the more restricted pursuit of banking, and strangely enough respecting it more deeply even than the management of a prosperous ranch, he nevertheless balked at paying out the eminently fair sacrifice figure at which the realty and fixtures were offered to him. By holding off, naming as his top price a sum exactly half, he hoped and expected for some time to line his pockets with more than seven thousand dollars obtained without the slightest effort.

That aspiration was doomed to disappointment. The stockholders, all cattlemen of the region, voted to let the building stand till its roof tumbled in, before selling it to the miser at such a price. They meant it. Slowly Squirrel began to understand. During the past two months he had been angling slyly for any sort of reduction, any compromise which would save his face and allow him to believe he had made money on the bargain.

And he had waited just too long! With the bank organized and in operation, there would have been no need to trust a man like Gila Joe. The gold could have been sent through to the bank. Squirrel, in his utter distraction, did not stop to consider the obvious fact that had he wished and dared to do so, he could have shipped

through the currency by the exact means the bank would have to use, Wells Fargo Express.

IRRITABLY Cussemout Crandall, driver of the stage from the north, kicked at one of the battered, bullet scarred, brass cuspidors adorning the sawdust-sprinkled floor of the Negus Saloon and Recreation Parlor. "I wasn't tryin' to sell y'u *that* hrruff-goobled, horny-tailed hunk of horizon!" he protested aggrievedly.

Stephen Lassiter grinned frostily. He reached down under the tail of his black coat, and brought up one of the huge Spracklin five-shooters. With a practiced, almost caressing touch, he released the big bracket lock which served also as a hind sight, spilled the dumpy cartridges into his palm; finally he reloaded.

"Yur think that the ranch is not a good buy, suh?" he questioned, drawling his words.

"Aw, what d'ye want?" Cussemout queried. "I ain't sayin' that outfit ain't a damn good buy—at some kinda price. Not at the price that miser'll ask. Why don'tcha ast Clem Eisler——?"

"I met Clem. He told me he'd done offehed sixty thousand, some time ago, but c'u'dn't get the place. If I c'u'd buy in for seventy, it maybe might be a puhchase, the way yuh see it?"

Cussemout's eyes popped. He had figured the rating of this oldster far less than casual talk of sums like sixty-seventy thousand.

"Why-uh," he gawped, "I ain't—uh—quallyfied——"

Although a gleam of amusement came in the harsh old eyes of Lassiter, his manner remained solemn. He had gone pals with Cussemout just long enough to realize that this undoubtedly was the first occasion, and probably would be the last of his life, when the old driver voluntarily confessed to anything less than the most emphatic wisdom of Solomon, range-embroidered.

"Puhhaps yuh might ride out thataway with me, though, suh. I respect yore experience and judgment, my friend."

Cussemout grinned. His age-narrowed chest thrust out three inches.

"Goober-gibblin' gumbats!" he chuckled, advertising his comparative sobriety by the use of that favorite by-phrase. "Le's travel, old-timer. Fust, though, le's imbibe. Barkeep!"

When the two rode forth from the Foley Livery and Boarding Stable, Cussemout was loquacious. He talked at length upon muleflesh and horseflesh he had known and handled, interspersing anecdotes of this sort with frank confessions of the fact that he had not guessed his companion to be a man of substance.

A puffy jowled, black browed man drew abruptly into shadow as the pair clumped forth on their hired mounts. In the Negus within the past hour a certain amount of such talk had come to his ears. Bart Tully was down on his luck, mainly owing to his killing of a young puncher with whom he had played two-handed stud poker. The puncher saw, or thought he saw, evidence of cheating. He accused, then drew. The fact that his holster just then was swung almost to the middle of his back, was tragic. The shot from Bart's gun splintered his breast-bone.

There could have been no thought of a trial, for if Bart had not defended himself he would have died. Still, more than a few customers of the tables and bar believed that young Raff Lisston had been absolutely right. By tacit consent Bart Tully had been left to shuffle his own deck for more than two weeks. It was expected that he would leave town.

Bart waited until the two merged with the shadows. Then he raced back a dozen yards, leaped upon his own mount, and dashed away at a racing gallop, circling. He knew where the two were bound. That old fool carried money, real coin. Since he had been unsuccessful in inveigling the old fellow into any game of chance, Bart was prepared for harsher measures. His derringer, the weapon with which he had killed Raff Lisston, went into a back pocket. Into the lapel holster, unsnapped another notch, slid the short-barreled .44 he preferred for combat occurring elsewhere than at the card table or faro layout. Then he rode at a fast gait for a point midway between Foley and the Soap Bubble ranch.

Lassiter was forced to regret to some extent the fact that he had asked old Cussemout to accompany him. The driver, with three hastily swallowed drinks added to the pair he had taken earlier, was loudly genial. He asked many questions which the newcomer did not care to answer explicitly, then launched into a narrative mood. He told the entire history of the Soap Bubble. He compared the miserly

but strong Lot Emery, original owner of the ranch, with his hoodle-whinklin' successor, much to the latter's discredit. The Emerys had gone down, and they would go out; not a woman east of the Pacific would think of hitching to Squirrel, unless maybe he got dodderin' and old, and the woman wasn't over and above particular.

THERE was no warning. A red streak blazed from the chaparral. Old Cussemout uttered a single choked cry and pitched forward over the horn of his saddle, a heavy slug through his right side and right elbow. He jerked, slid off to the ground, and painfully sought to bring out his weapon left-handedly.

Other shots had occurred, three of them. One buried itself in the brain of Lassiter's horse, which went down as if praying. The second, a heavy slug from one of the Spracklins, knocked free a sizeable branch of evergreen oak ten inches from the unknown bandit's shoulder. The second shot from Lassiter's gun, fired just as he lit in a crouch upon the ground in front of his horse, cleft the square chin of Bart Tully and went backward through the great artery of his neck. Bart fell, kicking and slobbering his defeat.

In the dim starlight Lassiter vouchsafed the man only a single glance. Then he strode back.

"I'm all right. Didja get him?" demanded the driver snarlingly. "Damn his hooleyooed hide! I——"

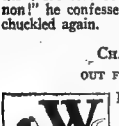
"He will be dead soon, my friend," stated Lassiter evenly. "Are you fit to ride to the Soap Bubble?"

Cussemout Crandall raised himself a little, and chuckled.

"And I was wonderin' ef you c'uld hit the broad side of a barn with them cannon!" he confessed irrelevantly. And he chuckled again.

Chapter X

Out from Under



WITH the dead body of Bart Tully tied upon, that worthy's own mount, and forking Cussemout's horse with the stage driver swaying and chuckling before him on the saddle, Stephen Lassiter rode to the Soap Bubble. Cussemout Crandall would not handle the reins for many a day, yet he seemed not to care especially. Of paramount interest to him just then was the manner in which the old comrade had gone over the saddle horn and landed shooting, and shooting straight! That incident, not thought at all important by the man who one day would be made the hero, had the makings of a legend in it, if only Cussemout lived long enough to tell, retell and embellish the facts the way a story ought to be adorned.

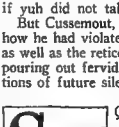
After the loss of some blood Cussemout talked freely. He made observations which even liquor could not have brought to his tongue. He voiced a secret thought.

"Wonder why yo're aimin' t' buy the Soap Bubble?" he maunderted. "I bet I know. Yuh was askin' me a lotta questions about that hell-hootin' wazzpoodle, Gila Joe. Aw-w, I r-remember. I tole yuh plenty, too, and it's all straight goods, too. He's there, tougher'n Louie Wrenn, old Wild Bill, or any of 'em. He's a killer. Likewise he's got a job out here. Foreman for that chilly-blistered, chokin', carrion crow Squirrel Emery. Foreman—hell, if Gila Joe kin stand workin' for him, there's gotta be somethin' funny a-tween 'em. I dunno. Why d'ye s'pose he does it? I reckon you'll do somethin' about Joe and his job, though, eh? Fire him, mebbe?"

Lassiter tightened his grip about the belt of his wounded friend.

"I shall do suthin', suh," he responded, "but foh now I'd take it as a great favoh if yuh did not talk about it. I——"

But Cussemout, rigid with realization of how he had violated the code of the West as well as the reticences of friendship, was pouring out fervid apologies and protestations of future silence.



SQUIRREL EMERY was lying down, his eyes glassy upon the ceiling, and occasional low-voiced groans coming from his lips. Two Colt's revolvers lay at his nervous, picking hands, as though, indeed, he expected the errant Gila Joe to return and brazen out the circumstances of his defalcation. Red rims circled Squirrel's eyes. He had taken to drinks of brandy neat; the liquor kept him awake, if applied internally at shortening intervals, yet it caused no perceptible exhilaration of spirit.

The ranch owner knew himself wounded

deeply, almost mortally. Worst of all he could ask no sympathy from even the least peon on the ranch. Twenty thousand dollars appealed to any of his helpers merely as a preponderant fraction of Squirrel's yearly income. It did not mean loss of the ranch, or anything like that. And, until a man really got down to brass tacks with tragically overwhelming circumstances, the West of this decade was more apt to grin and deride than to waste consolation. Especially when the loser was known to be rich, as was Squirrel Emery.

He started. A horse had whinnied from the corral. Tense, he listened, elbowed up from the couch. Was that—it was the sound of hoofbeats approaching. With a spring like that of a jack-in-the-box, Squirrel Emery gained the worn rug, seized his Winchester, hastily slipped up and back a Colt's in its holster, then dashed for the doorway and the veranda. If that were Gila Joe——

No such luck. The approaching horsemen, who had passed the far clump of prickly pear which bounded his owned holding, at the trail from Vierra, came onward toward the ranch at a disinterested canter. From a distance of one hundred yards in the early moonlight Squirrel discerned that the riders were not of the coterie which had driven his white-faces and dogies to Bender.

Lassiter and Cussemout rode up. They saw the long figure standing tensed with a rifle half-raised.

Cussemout sang forth the greeting, "Hello the house!" and added, "Yuh there, Squirrel? Oh, yeh. Well I brung yuh a visitor. Nemmind the gun."

Indifferently, seeming dazed now that he was forced to extend the ordinary range courtesies, Emery nervously set down the rifle. It fell to the boards with a clatter. He reached swiftly, and placed it again with its front sight against a pillar. Then he welcomed the pair, effusively and yet with strained, odd silences. His thoughts were not on the visitors, neither of whom he attached to ranch affairs in any degree. Cussemout was to be placated by ordinary civility perhaps, as he could bring news of the cattle markets and the long trail to the north on his next stage trip. The other man, a stranger to Squirrel until the moment of Cussemout's introduction, undoubtedly was a casual. Squirrel ignored him.

During the ensuing half-hour, which was filled with nail-bitings and fidgetings on the part of Squirrel, a flow of nonessential talk from the wounded stage driver, and little voluntary speech beside that required for polite attention from the stranger in the black coat, nothing happened. Obviously Cussemout was trying to make the visit appear unimportant, and failing. He could not know that the basic reason was Squirrel's agony of spirit.

Then, from a clear sky, Lassiter made a proposition. It began almost as an apology for his interest in the range, and ended with a suggestion which brought Squirrel Emery suddenly erect and calculating, striving to seize hold of the jagged ends of his frayed nerves. Lassiter had come out with at least a small notion of buying a ranch! Ordinarily Squirrel Emery would have been stand-offish, beyond all reason in the matter of price. Tonight there was a new factor which he had to consider, one not known, he believed, to either of his callers.

A brilliant thought lightninged through the mind of the ranch owner. If only these men could be hoodwinked in regard to Gila Joe's theft of the money paid for the steers, perhaps Emery himself might come clear! Ten minutes before he would have discounted his hopes of the eighteen or twenty thousand dollars, for five thousand dollars cash in hand. Now, however, he looked back upon the possibilities with all the optimism of a previous calculation. Twenty-two thousand at the very least.

Characteristically, although on a previous inventory he had made the value of these marketable steers considerably less than this flattering price, and the other greater assets of the ranch above their real cash value, now he boosted the steers and hedged a trifle upon the breeding herd and the owned acres. His first figure was out of the question, of course. One hundred thousand dollars cash for all the fixtures, the herds, four owned sections, the right to a huge share of the semi-desert range for pasturage, and the rather imponderable good will.

Cussemout snorted. He rose to his feet, pinched his long, thin nose, and howled acrimonious derision. He expressed his opinion of the Soap Bubble in general, and of Squirrel in particular. And he did not mince his words. Through what promised to be an argument keyed to high tension cut the resonant voice of the elderly stranger.

"Theah should be no ahgument, gentlemen," he reminded firmly. "If any, this hyah is my lookout, friend." The last to Cussemout.

Lassiter's seamed hand fell upon the driver's thin, corded arm, and drew the latter to the chair he had vacated. Cussemout, on the verge of a new outburst of vituperation, subsided rather ludicrously in a *haw!* of expelled breath as the seat of his corduroys met the unexpectedly low chair seat.

"That price, suh, is not a basis foh negotiations, of cohse," continued Lassiter, withdrawing his last long, black cheroot and interpolating an explanation of why he could not offer such a smoke to his two friends.

He lit the weed, drew in two bluish pints of almost liquid incense, then exhaled slowly.

"I offeh seventy thousand, five thousand cash down," he observed. "That is my best price, suh. I do not haggle."

Squirrel Emery had no such compunctions. Even one thousand dollars plus or minus in a bargain he considered worth months of chicane, skullduggery and effort. He made the usual protestations of horror, of amusement; words which were quieted rather suddenly by the fact that both his auditors knew he had been willing to accept exactly that price a short time earlier.

QUIRREL bit his tongue. Damn such a slip! He might as well have asked the previous prospect one hundred thousand as seventy, since sixty thousand was the very best to be squeezed. The ranch was worth at least six or seven thousand—yes, perhaps ten thousand!—more than the present offer now, in the owner's close and optimistic calculation. He had pastured the steers several months additional.

Now, however, there was a new and compelling factor, Gila Joe Braden. The outlaw foreman had vanished over the horizon with twenty-two—yes, twenty-five thousand dollars' worth of the ranch assets! Today it was far from certain to others that Gila Joe would not return. Squirrel had no doubts; he knew. Another day or two and all the world also would know that the 5-o had been bilked; that Squirrel Emery had been taken for a whole herd of white-faces and a corralful of dogies.

That revelation would be intolerable. Now, right now, was his chance to get out from under. For a few minutes, of course, he would hem and haw, would bring forth the ranch books to show the really handsome profit realized in the past three sales of steers, but then——

To the infinite disgust of the dizzy, light-headed Cussemout Crandall, a rather peculiar bargain was concluded. Squirrel finally agreed to accept, provisionally and for cash, the price of seventy thousand, since Lassiter had not evinced the slightest intention of stirring from that price.

Squirrel made queer provisions, though; still queerer when he found that the only terms on which Lassiter could or would do business were five thousand down and sixty-five thousand within fifteen days—the time it would take the express company to bring in, with adequate margin, a sum of money he had salted away in a city midway between his old home and this new region.

"The payment and the risk connected with the herd taken to Bender by Gila Joe both are yours," said Squirrel, when the details almost were closed. "You understand and accept that?"

"I'm willing," nodded Lassiter, his voice suddenly toneless.

Squirrel heaved an internal sigh of relief. "Then my conditions are these. You pay down five thousand tonight, and sign an agreement to place in my hands here in Foley—or in the hands of a responsible party here whom I shall name, if I am absent—sixty-five thousand dollars within fifteen days, the usual three days of grace to operate. If you fail, you forfeit the down payment. Is that understood?" This was the cold-blooded but untrained financier speaking.

At that moment Squirrel merely was grasping for anything he could secure. The five thousand, all Lassiter could pay down, looked to him like salvage from the wreck of his Hereford hopes. Well, better the quarter of a crust than no bread!

"That is satisfactory, suh," said Lassiter, "provided you can give me possession tonight."

"Why—why—?" stuttered Squirrel. He had not counted on moving, at all. He was not used to such swift action, either, though this time it suited his purposes and his fears; at any moment one of the Mexicans or Gila Joe himself might come back to report a disastrous failure.

"Because Ah couldn't sleep othehwise," said Stephen Lassiter, cryptically.

The snaggle-toothed man, who had gaped three or four seconds, finally understood. He leered. After all, this fool

would repent. Squirrel would have the ranch again in fifteen days—eighteen days, was it? Why bother to recognize even so obvious an insult?

Stephen Lassiter drew a thin bill-case from an inside pocket of his long, black jacket. This case he unsnapped, and laid out upon the table five yellow-backed rectangles of seamed paper. Upon the uppermost showed the figure 1,000.

"Youah thoughts and mine seem to meet, suh," he said. "Shall we draw the papehs, and call anotheh witness?"

"Yes, if you'll take my terms!" exploded Squirrel. "It's a bargain, sir!" Unconsciously he had adapted the Arizonan's form of polite address; this was the first time since childhood Squirrel had ended a sentence with the word sir.

When Cussemout and Stephen Lassiter were left alone, the former voiced his very grave doubts, his vituperative disgust. Something queer was behind all that remarkable acquiescence on the part of the ranch owner. Squirrel was known as a hard nut, a man who never asked for exact change, always for a premium.

"Yuh kin git that money here on time? Fer shore on time?" ended Cussemout dubiously.

Stephen Lassiter nodded slowly.

"If Ah had to do so, Ah could have paid twice, even three times, that much foh this ranch. Gila Joe Braden wohks heah," he said deliberately. "And now, my friend, if a wohd of this passes youah lips, even in whisky, youah no longah my friend."

Holding forth one hand for the stage driver's clasp, the oldster reached behind his opposite hip and laid a long, grim Spracklin .50 across his own right forearm.

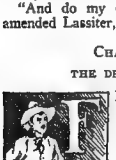
"Ah'm heah to meet a man."

"And kill him, b' God!" breathed Cussemout, with sudden conviction.

"And do my damndest to kill him," amended Lassiter, grimly.

Chapter XI

THE DEVIL'S CHOICE



FROM his position facing the fire, backed by the impenetrable shadow of faint moonlight upon the chaparral, Gila Joe Braden faced the Mexican who had knifed through his dummy shrouded in blankets.

"So you believed the chance for vengeance and loot worth while, Juan Valdez," spoke the foreman grimly. "Poor judgment, suh!"

An inarticulate sound broke from the lips of Juan Valdez. The Mexican was terror-stricken, shaking from head to foot as one in the palsy. Gone were his dreams of loot, of bandit chieftainship. Gone was all of that need of self-assertion before his fellows who had heard him boast. Juan was disorganized mentally and physically, all in the space of three seconds. He had planned murder, struck, and found the blanket stuffed with nothing more substantial than mesquite branches—where should have been the body of a sleeping Gila Joe!

In the next second, which was one of silence and of yanking forth his bloodless knife, Juan remembered with gusts of terror the tales of the demoniac qualities of this man he had set forth in the moonlight to kill. The third second—ah, for Juan that was the ultimate, the most exquisite half-heartbeat of the time he yet had to live! In that he heard. He turned. He saw upright and derisively challenging, the figure of the Soap Bubble ranch foreman, the man Juan had come to slay.

"A murderer, eh?" said Gila Joe, coldly enough. "Well, turn around in the light of the fire. I'd like to look at a thing like you. Turn around!"

Abrupt warning. Juan caved. He snivelled in sheer terror, swung about on his haunches. He still held the knife.

"You're an ugly, indecent sort of animal," continued the calm, cutting voice of Gila Joe, a voice deadly as the *chik-a-chik* of a bull diamond rattler, though quieter. "You tried to kill me, Juan, just like your *compadre* tried. You know how far he got with it; where he is now. Where would *you* like to be—buried?"

The last word leaped like the threatening stroke of an adder. Yet Gila Joe had not unhitched his thumbs from his crossed belts. And just below the right hand of Juan Valdez lay a Colt's .38 with five of the six chambers loaded. Three of his long fingers, extended, touched the cool butt.

Yet the Mexican could not speak, could not hurl the knife; even though on its length of steel or upon the five cartridges in his six-gun lay his only chance for life. Tales had been told of this man's magic. Even before an opponent could clasp the butt of a revolver, this man's weapons were spitting death. Juan cowered. With an

abrupt heave he might throw the knife and hit his target, for he was counted accurate both with steel and lead. Yet of what avail, if he died? This killer was said, by those who knew the mysteries, to be fated to kill the man who killed him. Never had Juan really believed any such tale, but now he did. And Juan cowered and was unnerved before the thought of death, despite the fact that he had dared it many times, always upheld by a belief in his own invincibility.

Gila Joe, with no weapon in his hands, strode forward slowly.

"Give me the knife," he bade without especial emphasis.

Here was Juan's moment. With a quick sweep he could bury the blade deep in the body of a man; and not even superstition could make him think that Gila Joe could reach and fire either of his guns in the space of the tenth second. Of course, he might do so after——

Juan, his hand shaking, lifted the weapon, hilt first. Gila Joe took it, threw it over his shoulder without looking to see where it was fated to land. Then he lifted away the Colt's, and tossed it likewise.

"Stand up! Turn away!" he bade.

Quakingly, Juan obeyed.

The foreman searched with swift fingers for other weapons, discovering, quite as he expected, a second knife in a boot sheath. This blade disappeared in the darkness. Quickly unclasping his own belts, Gila Joe slipped them into the chaparral, then swung around the hulking Mexican.

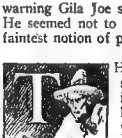
"You are going to die, Juan Valdez," he said, and each of his words was a sting. "Because you are going to die, I am going to tell you one fact which no one knows about me. I'm not supernatural, and now I'm not armed. But still I'm going to bend your back across my knees, destroy you.

"Why? Simply because I've formed a queer creed, one the Spanish *conquistadores* who mixed their proud blood to make you would have understood far better than you ever could. Life is loyalty, Juan Valdez. Treachery is death. Do you *sabe* that, *muchacho*? A little while ago I became a man; a few months ago, perhaps. Another man dishonored me, I believe. Since then I have sought many things. Danger was one. Fortune was one. Both I have found, though not through my own especial virtue but through a spell both upon the dice and upon my own brain. With luck came danger, of course. A night in Chihuahua with the ivory dice when nothing could go wrong; you will understand, Juan Valdez, for you, too, have gambled with all you had, your life. That is forfeit."

"*Madre de Dios!*" whispered Juan. His eyes evaded. He could have stood a quick attack; yet this cutting, yet somehow furious explanation far beyond his narrow-gauge brain, unnerved him more. He shook visibly.

"And now, consider well," continued Gila Joe, his voice taking on a rasp of hatred for this man he had made representative of all that is treacherous in mankind. "I am unarmed. I am going to break your neck, then throw you into that fire. Do you understand? *Cuidado!*"

During the warning Gila Joe had taken several measured steps backward. Juan's eyes fastened upon the slim, beltless waist, upon the empty hands. Gila Joe, though powerful, lacked a full thirty pounds of Juan's bulk; and Juan knew personal combat from a lifetime in the Mexican purlieus of small frontier towns. The chance! Juan's eyes almost popped. Of a sudden he crouched. At the word of warning Gila Joe strode forward, stalked. He seemed not to worry, not to have the faintest notion of peril.



THE Mexican crouched still lower. In the last instant a twinge in his heart forecast some duplicity on the part of Gila Joe, some overmastering magic. Yet Juan prepared, his fingers rigid and crooking. His heavy arms spread in an obtuse angle. Of a sudden he leaped; a high-keyed ululation, his battlecry in extremity, leaving his lips. This was better than an even chance. With one grip of his gorilla arms he could rend that slimmer youngster, for all his playing with the forces of darkness. Anything Juan Valdez clutched was his. Gila Joe, unarmed, was no more and no less than a lighter, younger man. He would go down. Juan would smash open his head.

One who knows Mexican character thoroughly does not call all of them knaves nor yet all of the knaves cowards. They may be cowards; but so may trustworthy men. Juan Valdez, stripped of his fears of the occult, given an even break man to man, forgot his shivering. True, he missed the first, clutching tackle, and received instead of a grasp of Gila Joe's

thighs, a smashing blow to the mouth which bent and loosened inward four teeth in his lower jaw. But he chuckled, rather hysterically, yet with a certain glee. He had clawed away the foreman's shirt at the neck. His long fingernails had scratched deep into the skin above the corded muscles.

He did not fall. Stumbling, he felt Gila Joe upon him, a lithe, hungry panther seeking a hold more sophisticated fighters later would call a half-nelson. And not getting it. Gila Joe weighed not more than 178. Juan Valdez, weighing eight years earlier and for the last time, tipped the beam at a few pounds above 200. He was heavier than that now. Little of the bulk was fat; he had made himself a top hand among the *vaqueros* of the 5-0. Gila Joe was flipped toward the fire, was on his feet like a cat, was dancing, striking, ducking beneath the Mexican's arms.

Slowly the glee faded from Juan's smile. The smile vanished. He could not pin this devil! They had been on their feet again now for many seconds. Juan despised the gringo art of hitting with the clenched fist. Yet one eye closed. Three teeth fell inward and had to be ejected in blood. And the beginnings of thwarted daze came into his narrow, single-purpose mind. He would gather in that floating, iron-hard face which jeered. He would stop those stinging fists.

And he did corner Gila Joe, who tripped unexpectedly. In a staggering half-crouch Gila Joe felt the clasp of Juan's arms, the touch of threatening death. Juan, far heavier and with one-fifth again the weight of muscle, was sure in close quarters. Clasping, hugging, pinioning, making ready to crush in the breast-bone and ribs of his foe. Juan set his teeth in a thick lock of Gila Joe's hair. He strained. The hair broke. Some strands pulled forth by the roots. Yet the set, masklike straining of the man beneath did not alter to the pain. Gila Joe fought for life. One iota more or less of pain could not matter. He was caught, helpless, in those arms.

Helpless? A thought flashed through his mind, an expedient worth knowing in a pitiless combat from which no stratagem is barred, yet one which men wholly white hesitate to use against one another. Here the loss of a square inch of hair, the clawing of Juan's long-nailed hands toward his eyeballs, relieved the foreman of compunction. He abandoned ordinary resistance temporarily, clutched the nails of first, second and third fingers of his right hand about the index fingernail of Juan's left hand, then with a quick, tearing jerk ripped away two-thirds of the nail.

A scream burst from the Mexican's lips. That second of intense, peculiar agony, a sort of pain strangely less easy to stand than the amputation of a whole finger, drove every precaution from his mind. His grip loosened.

Gila Joe ducked, freed himself, and turned to face his antagonist. With the crown of his head nestled beneath the *vaquero's* jaw, Gila Joe started a long uppercut with every ounce of his whole strength and the fulcrum of a crooked elbow. The blow flashed upward. Only the slit of a second intervened between the instant when he threw his own head backward and the crunching impact of knuckles upon a jaw which jarred—and gave.

Juan's head snapped backward. Unknown to Gila Joe, two cracks started upward from points before Juan's right-angled ears, cracks which staggered their bony edges beneath the terrific force. In truth they did not matter especially, for the Mexican went down like a bowling pin before a strike ball.

Scarcely had the treacherous one struck the ground when Gila Joe, leaping like a maddened cougar, was upon him. No mercy was in the American's thought. Still, there was nothing left to do. The head of Juan Valdez waggled on its limp neck like an aster on its wilted stem. Juan was dead.

Gila Joe came to one knee, gulping in great gasps of breath. He reeled to his feet and, with a final summoning of strength, he lifted the unconscious figure and heaved it into the chaparral. Then he stumbled back and stared at the fire.

He failed to see the half-courageous onlooker who peered from the shadowed chaparral seventy paces distant, a watcher who had glued his eye to the sights of a rifle during the whole of this strange combat, yet who had kept from pulling the trigger because of a certain servile loyalty to Juan Valdez. Now a streak of orange fire split the night; the crack of an ancient Henry reverberated from the butte.

Gila Joe's legs withered. Feet toward the fire, he seemed to telescope to the ground in a heap smaller than his sinewy bulk.

The shivering *vaquero* who fired the shot did not wait to lift as much as the six-guns from the body of his range boss. He turned and scudded back through the mesquite to his horse, vaulted, and raked

the surprised mount with the cruel Mexican spurs. The 5-0 ranch never would glimpse him again.

Chapter XII

GRIM TOIL

THE fire had died to a maroon glow in a vault of velvety black. For upward of half an hour a rider, fastening his eyes upon that fading beacon, rode a tired mount long after both horse and man should have camped.

Wallace Braden had lost the stage road, missed the town of Bender, and would have given up to make a shiftless camp save for that fire. He was thirsty, tired, disgruntled. If it proved possible to share another rider's accommodations, however, that would be better than having to do for himself. In spite of living the whole of his twenty-six years in the Southwest he had managed to avoid, except on a few occasions, even the most ordinary culinary duties outdoor men take for granted.

Faintly borne to him came the report of a rifle. He could not be certain, but it seemed to have originated near that fire. He reined in, sitting the drooping horse for several minutes, cogitating upon such a queer occurrence. Then of a sudden he heard hoofbeats. His own horse nickered half-heartedly, but there came no answer. Probably the sound went unheard. For the space of a long second the glowing point of light was blotted out. Then, as the thunder of hoofs neared, the bulk of a rider and mount passed. Though he swept by within ten yards of Wallace Braden, the latter could discern only vaguely that the crouching stranger wore a tall hat, probably a sombrero.

Wallace was not one to blunder into peril. Far from it. His own scheming, sulky mind envisioned the possibilities readily enough. A shot from the dark. A lone camper on this dry mesa. A man who galloped away in obvious haste.

The newcomer dismounted stiffly, tied his horse to a tough branch of mesquite, then went forward with great caution. With one revolver clasped in his right hand, and the other hand held forward to ward away occasional small branches from his face, he crept toward the light. Now he saw a huddle of blankets which seemed empty, there beyond the fire. Could that seeming fugitive who had passed in the darkness have been the one who had built the camp; some timorous Mexican, perhaps, frightened so badly by some prowling beast that he fled, not even stopping for his equipment?

That theory did not satisfy. A target for that bullet doubtless had been there near the fire; and if said target had been a cougar or lobo, the rider, however nervous, would have shot more than once. Proceeding slowly, Wallace came at last upon an explanation. Though missing the Mexican, he found a limp body outstretched, the victim of that rider of the night, undoubtedly.

For some minutes Wallace Braden contemplated the seeming corpse, all the while straining his ears for the slightest sound which might attest the return of the murderer. None came. The night's silence was broken only by a far away *whoo-a-whoo* of the velvet-winged barred owl, coasting through the night in search of prey.

"Reckon he figured it a job," muttered Wallace.

He poked at the embers, saw that they would die soon, and so exerted himself to gather a few dozen handfuls of twigs. By dint of persistent blowing, he coaxed them into a slender tongue of living flame. In the resulting flicker he cast about for possible provisions, then, seeing none, made a way back to the gaunt, sinewy pinto which had borne him on his long ride from a neighboring Territory. The bronco, all its spirit submerged in fatigue, stodged after him. He removed the saddle, bridle and pack, tethering the beast with a ten foot rope where some sparse grass offered a modicum of grazing.

Of water he could not discover a sign. Grimacing, he brought from the blanket roll a half-emptied bottle of whisky. Pouring a small portion of the fiery liquid into a tin cup he drank it in three precise swallows, then replaced the bottle. He did not care at all for the taste of liquor; drank it solely because it was better than no beverage at all, and because he was very tired.

Idly then, without special interest, he lounged over to the body of the prone man, slipped one hand inside the open neck of the flannel shirt, and felt for a heartbeat. He did not feel any sign. The body still was warm, yet that meant only that it had not had time to cool in death. Taking a fistful of the crinkly, uncombed hair, Wallace started to lift the head to look for a wound. His fingers encountered a sticky mess. In the firelight he saw that the

whole top of the stranger's head was clotted with blood.

"A clean pot-shot," nodded Wallace, a faintly reminiscent look coming into his close-set eyes. He shivered, then shrugged as if to shed a disagreeable memory. "Never knew what hit him." He stepped back, wiping the tips of his fingers precisely upon a white handkerchief; then, remembering something, he cast the square of linen into the fire. "Never do to have anyone asking embarrassing questions," he cogitated aloud.

Coldly enough then he bent, searched the stranger's clothes, and discovered a money belt and a small purse. He appropriated the contents, except one of the gold coins of the belt and a pinch of silver, then replaced the belt and purse. The remainder of the effects from the pockets—a large bladed jackknife, tobacco and papers, a pair of yellow, translucent dice and a pair of bandanna handkerchiefs—held no interest. Next he lifted out the two pearl-handled Colt's revolvers, grimacingly ran his fingers over the filed indentations, and gingerly slid them back into their flapless half-breed holsters. Wallace Braden turned away, wiped his hands. Then, indifferently, he lifted the other's blankets and tossed them over the inert body. While he prepared the late supper he had no desire to look at a stiffening corpse. It might nullify his appetite.

Little could he suspect that if, in that moment, he had cared even enough to glance at the blood-smeared features of the man on the ground, the whole of his life might have been ordered differently! His only care, as he cooked a simple meal of the range grub he despised, then washed it down with a second, smaller cup of the whisky, was that he leave this camp as soon after dawn as he might awaken. In the mission which was taking him southward, he could not afford any complications apt to cause delay.

ONE of the knees of Gila Joe flexed outward, moving slowly like a python's coil induced by the first hunger pang. From his lips, after a moment of almost inaudible breathing into the crushed evergreen oak against which his face was pressed, issued a low moan, the first symptom of pain-filled semi-consciousness. A wait. Then more slow movements of his hands and legs, a turning of his muscled torso, as, unconscious of the nature of the smothering shroud, he tried to throw aside the blanket.

The covering fell away. He groaned, this time somewhat louder. The sound mingled with the thin-chested, waspish snore of Wallace Braden, who lay thirty feet away. A third groan stopped midway. Dazedly, Gila Joe Braden opened his eyes; closed them again. After a minute, still knowing almost nothing of his own condition, he rolled helplessly to one side, waited longer, then flopped, head down and dripping globules of red as he fought to straighten his elbows, to rise.

An indeterminate time later he was on his knees, touching fingertips to a reeling world of blackness. Long since the fire had died. Overhead the stars had paled with the advent of false dawn. They would brighten again a space of minutes before the lightening curtain rose from the east. Slowly, dully, Gila Joe settled back in a sitting position, and raised one hand to his head which ached as though the sharp edge of an axe had riven the center part of his hair.

The hand came down wet, bloody. He stared, unable to see it in the dim light. Yet a detached common sense, something which seemed apart from all the ache and nausea of his awakening, seemed to be able to explain.

"Must have got bucked off," he spoke mumblingly. "A hell of a note. A hell of——"

He broke off, turned his head to the side painfully, and blinked at another patch of blackness. From it emanated a rasping snore. Gila Joe's brow wrinkled in pain and puzzlement. Who was with him? Somehow he didn't seem to remember where he was—or much of anything else. His head ached horribly. That was enough and more than enough. His fingers, searching the external cause, discovered a bevel through his scalp and, apparently, a furrow through the bone in the exact crown of his head!

"No horse—did that—nope," he muttered. "Bullet—shot down."

As one who walks in a nightmare, yet knows the position of ordinary things he staggered to his feet. Some moments elapsed before he even could attempt a step. Then he did, with questionable success. He walked four paces into the scrub toward the point he had left his scanty equipment and his tethered horse, then fell heavily to one knee. He crawled the remaining distance to the almost impenetra-

ble chaparral in which lay his little cache, found a handkerchief and the new pair of suspenders he had purchased at Bender, and a canteen. Swashing water into his parched throat and over his throbbing scalp wound, he made a compress of the clean handkerchief, then tied it in place ludicrously enough with the webbed elastic, knotted under his chin.

He got up, stared puzzled at the east where now the first faint traces of daybreak grayed the recurrent shadow.

"I dunno," he said aloud. "I dunno just what the hell——"

Then he shut his eyes. A grim line came to his mouth. Over there a man lay snoring. Obviously this must have been his partner; on what emprise Gila Joe had not the slightest idea in the world. Still, the elements of logic were at his command. He thought slowly, and with pain; yet his conclusions were sound enough. Granting that this one who snored had been his partner, why had that other let him lie in his blood, let him awaken beneath a shrouding blanket, let him fight the misery and nausea of semi-consciousness? Anyone who really cared could have discovered that he was not dead; could have gone for help.

The answer seemed plain enough to Gila Joe; his partner had shot him. Why, and how, he did not know. He moved vaguely, almost like one in a dream. He stopped inconsequentially, to break his two Smith & Wessons and peer at the unmarked butts of the cartridges. No, there had not been a fight, else he would have fired at least one shot.

The whole affair was a maze, and more than that. Gila Joe stopped short, staring about him at the unending circle of mesa, at the butte which rose eighty feet from the plateau. Nothing here was more than dimly familiar. What was he doing here, anyway? Slowly his hands went to his pockets, searched, found nothing except the makings of a smoke. These came forth, were used with automatic skill. Yet at that moment a chill mounted the spine of Gila Joe, a chill of fear and groping. He could remember something about a cattle drive, something about a rattlesnake which had bitten him—yes, there was the cicatrice, unhealed—and something about a whole lot of money he was taking somewhere.

Money? He felt for the canvas belt in which he was accustomed to carry all save a little of the change he took with him upon a trip. All the snapped pouches save one were empty. That one held a single weighty gold piece, a double eagle. Had not there been more? It seemed that he recalled two pouches satisfactorily heavy.

Feverishly he jammed his hands into the pockets of his corduroy trousers. Yes, a purse. This yielded little satisfaction, however. It was empty save for thirty cents, three dimes. Was that all the money he owned? Back in his mind, untouchable now but still there, was the strong feeling that he had money. Quite a lot of it. Where, though? Was it at a bank?

Good Lord in heaven, who was he?

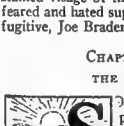
The query staggered him. He stopped, slapped the palm of one hand against his brow, and tried to think. For some reason his mind seemed halted, unable to come to grips with this blood-chilling question. He could think of many things—a dirty, snivelling owner of a ranch whose teeth stuck out in front, a white-bearded old man in a black coat, a girl who had smiled at him—from where? He could not remember anything distinctly.

The realization smote home, but meanwhile he was busy. He stalked up to the snoring figure, examined the sleeping man's six-guns. Both were loaded. Suspicious sniffing, however, granted the knowledge, seemingly damning, that one of the revolver barrels smelled faintly of burned powder. It had not been cleaned since firing.

Nodding grimly, though totally wrong and unaware of the fact, the man who had called himself Gila Joe Braden took away his braided lariat from the horn of his saddle. He returned swiftly, hitching a loop. When Wallace Braden awoke, he cried out in terror. His arms were pinioned. The remainder of a forty-foot rope was being wound about his ankles and torso. He could not move. And he looked upward, terrified, into the blood-stained visage of the one man on earth he feared and hated supremely, his cousin, the fugitive, Joe Braden.

Chapter XIII

THE ENIGMA



SOMETIMES fear can preserve lives as well as lose them for men. Wallace Braden lay speechless. Had he been able to envision the most horrible vengeance for all his sins possible to conjure, he would have named

a meeting with Joe Braden under exactly these circumstances.

In the Lassiter household, of which he had been a member, the name of Joe never was spoken. Tacitly old Stephen, Claire and he had taken for granted a tale wafted to them from the devil knows where, told through an itinerant purveyor of medicines as hearsay, that a youth answering the fugitive's description, and called Gila Joe, had gone down before the guns of Louie Wrenn, the famous killer. Exactly the reverse had been the case; yet news becomes garbled unrecognizably in word of mouth transmission.

Of the three, only Claire believed. She wept. Many nights she stared out into the stark unreality of the moonlight, and prayed that it had not been the tragedy the peddler portrayed.

Then came a morning when she had come down to breakfast singing, and with traces of moisture in her eyes, too. There was no sensible explanation, none which can be credited. Still she sang a little shakily throughout the day. For the first time for weeks she saddled her personal mount, Lady Guinevere, whose exercise for many days had been in the hands of a Mexican boy, and rode that spirited mare a riotous ten miles at any pace the animal elected. Inexplicably, Claire sang even as she came back to the ranch-house. The depressing terrain of the Gila had not affected her spirits.

THROUGH the mesquite, far to the southeastward, a pair of men rode. One was bound, pale, speechless. The other swayed a little on his saddle, even with no more heat upon his sombrero than the sun of seven o'clock.

Gila Joe was dizzy. He did not know where he headed with his prisoner. Some odd instinct sent him back in the general direction of Bender; yet his head ached with the puzzle of it all. He had exchanged no words with his prisoner. More or less he believed that this man had shot him down. He intended to find a town, then probe blindly until he discovered many things. He wondered concerning his partner, if this man *was* his partner. In this country, unlike the mining regions, a man did not take a tillicum unless mutual attraction was very strong. Looking at this terrified, snivelling stranger Gila Joe could not conceive of the slightest magnetism. Somehow he felt repelled definitely by the man who really was Wallace Braden.

"What made yuh shoot me?" Gila Joe demanded abruptly, turning toward his prisoner.

"I?" cried Wallace, honestly surprised. He had expected anything but this.

"Oh, I am not a fool. Yuh did it. Why?" demanded Gila Joe, a monotonous tone of grimness coming into his voice. He had thought over these questions so many times that it seemed he had repeated them to the object of their barb. "Why did yuh want to do it?"

The traces of a frozen grin appeared at Wallace's mouth. How devilishly strange his cousin was acting. Until now Wallace had believed that Joe knew more of certain previous affairs than he had on leaving the Gila Bend country. Was it possible that he did not?

A strange, unrecognizing look was in the other's eyes. He glowered, true enough. Wallace, helpless in his bonds, studied his captor. He shivered in a sudden hunch. Was there something the matter with Joe Braden? Well, he could test it. A plan which concerned the other and two horses came to germination in his scheming mind.

"Don't you know me?" he asked, plaintively.

"Yo're my partner, I s'pose. Yuh tried to kill me," came the brusque reply. There was not the slightest hint of a knowledge of kinship.

"Tell me my name, *compadre*. I am not your partner," came the rasping voice, consciously controlled now to a persuasive wihsper.

"The hell yuh—" began Gila Joe harshly. He stopped. Perhaps the hint of a fugitive memory obsessed him. Certainly his dislike and background of animosity toward the captive were not changed. "Yuh say so," he finished lamely. "Yuh lie."

"I don't lie!" shrilled Wallace, who for the first time envisioned a startling possibility for freedom.

This man was queer! Could that wound on his head have affected his memory? Certainly he did not seem to recognize Wallace. And he had not brought up the one topic which always lay in the back of the newcomer's mind, one which coupled with the name of Joe Braden to become synonymous with fears and squirmings upon a sweated cot.

Gradually, as the sun mounted in the sky, Wallace Braden tested his almost formless, incredible thought—still think-

ing of the horses. And he learned his theory was sound. Strangely, Joe did not know anything about himself, his origin, Claire, that old fool Stephen Lassiter whom Wallace had been pursuing—or anything else directly connected with affairs on the Gila River. He seemed to act and move in an obscuring fog. Whether or not that fog had existed prior to his wounding, Wallace did not know, and did not care. Wallace cursed himself for not making sure of the man who had lain so cold and still beneath his blanket, yet this development was almost as good.

Wallace scarcely felt the rawhide about his wrists and body. Soon, if they made a town, Joe would be forced to release him. The story would place Joe in detention for a time long enough to allow him, Wallace, to catch up with that senescent idiot, Lassiter, and bring him across the Territory, to his home where he belonged.

Blunderingly, following a queer instinct, which he could not have analyzed, Gila Joe drove on a roundabout way toward Bender. A sixth sense, functioning in default of clear and accurate memory, took him in the general direction of the town, then finally swerved him in a circle from the west, back of Main Street.

In sight of the town he halted, dismounted, untied the thongs which had imprisoned Wallace.

"I don't bring in prisoners," said Gila Joe, with a grimness which drove away the growing vestiges of color in his captive's cheeks. "Yuh stay here, or yuh ride free. Which is it?"

"You're still dizzy from that clout on the head that greaser gave you," said Wallace soothingly, a cunning, desperate glint in his eyes. "You haven't done a single thing right, Joe Braden. You don't even recognize your own horse, I bet!" This was the test Wallace had planned. If Joe allowed the transfer he had to be out of his mind. If he balked—well, Wallace would be no worse off.

"Joe Braden," muttered the other. Yes, that had a familiar ring. It was his name, of course; strange he should have forgotten it. The horse though— "What about the horse?" he queried, frowning in bewilderment.

"Why, you tied me on your own horse, and took mine! Surely, you haven't turned hosthief, have you, Joe?" The accent was forcedly jocular.

"Hell, no!" growled Gila Joe. "Yuh mean——"

"That *this* is your cayuse. Sure. What's the matter with you, old man? Don't you remember your own outfit, the Bar-U-Bar —the old Gila Bend ranch—and *Claire?*"

The foreman stiffened. What was wrong with his mind? When someone brought up a name he saw the person clearly, recalled a little—oh, so very little—but could not penetrate the mists to a clear memory of just what relation that person was to himself.

He nodded slowly.

"I reckon I'm all wrong, hombre," he admitted wearily, and brought forth his jackknife. Just about to cut the precious lariat, he paused; then fumbled it loose with fingers which seemed to have lost all their cunning. "A greaser did this, yuh say?"

"Yep," breathed Wallace, his whole body tense. "I saw him riding away, and came up to your fire. You seemed dead. I was sorry, but there didn't seem to be anything I could do before morning. I didn't get a good look at the man who shot you down; and it was too late to try to locate a deputy sheriff at that time of night. I—well, Joe, I was damn sorry, but I also was tired as all getout. I'd ridden from Kendrick—sixty miles or thereabouts—and I was all in, down and out. Fact, I'm just beginning to get my wits."

He flexed his arms, rubbed the welts made by the tight-drawn lariat, and then dismounted.

"You'll want your own horse, naturally," he said in a careless way. "It's a whole lot better than mine."

THAT was the test. Gila Joe looked from one animal to the other. He would not admit the superiority mentioned; but, strangely enough, he seemed to know both horses! Though he did not realize the fact then, both had belonged to his personal string when he rode for Stephen Lassiter on the Gila Bend.

"I reckon I'm not myself, quite," he muttered. "I'm sorry I was so rough with yuh, *amigo*. Yuh see how it was," he finished helplessly.

"O' course. No hard feelings," assured Wallace, a trifle breathlessly.

Followed then the probings of a mind temporarily cut from its moorings. Gila Joe, to another than the sneering, anxious, exultant Wallace Braden, would have been pitiful in his great strength and helpless-

ness. Gradually Wallace plumbed the whole truth. Gila Joe still was in a daze. Wallace concocted a tissue of falsehoods, took for himself the name of an ex-hand of the Gila Bend ranch, and twitted Joe Braden for his long absence. Claire Lassiter had been asking for him.

From Joe's perceptible twinge at mention of the girl's name Wallace saw that in some measure the fugitive remembered her. Well, that could be made strictly non-dangerous, except for Gila Joe. That subject had better not be pursued too closely, though, lest a stronger memory return. First and foremost Wallace Braden wanted free access to the town of Bender, whither he had traced Stephen Lassiter, the man upon whom Wallace depended for a fortune, all his prospects.

The conversation occupied more than half an hour. Gila Joe stumbled in a fog of half-memories. None of them was worth belief to the full. This man, according to his story, once had known him on the Gila Bend ranch. Why doubt his tale? Top hands rarely go in for murder and robbery; the robbery of his belt, if he really had had money to any amount therein, would have to be laid to the Mexican who had fired the shot which Wallace described quite truthfully.

Strangely enough Gila Joe seemed to remember a short, terrific combat with a Mexican bandit; was it the same one? The fact that he had thought that he had killed the other, made no difference now. Doubtless he had been mistaken.

Wallace Braden, beginning to understand a little of the other's problem, laid a hand upon the arm of Gila Joe. Ensued then what purported to be a manual by which Joe might be guided. A month or so ago word had come that Joe Braden had ridden away. That was not at all understandable, since he was wooing the belle of the whole Gila Bend region, and she seemed inconsolable after his leaving. Perhaps he had taken as final a woman's no, given when she meant a qualified yes? Well, women were queer. Joe hadn't been in love many times, probably. Anyway, the whole truth was that back there a girl was eating her heart out because he had ridden south. Wouldn't he go back? This was day. Supplies were in the pack. Why did Joe hesitate, unless he did not care for the girl after all?

A queer sound came from Joe Braden's throat. He remembered that much. He would have given his life for Claire Lassiter. Anything and all—but honor. Queerly, he half-remembered that he could not offer her much. Why had that been?

Wallace Braden played his part excellently. Once sure of the limitations of Joe's memory, Wallace built a story of pure falsehood. He delighted in the task, for it would send back his hated enemy to a sure death of dishonor on the scaffold. Once Joe Braden had been hanged, Wallace felt that life would move smoothly and relentlessly toward fortune, for him—if he could locate that crazy old duck, Stephen Lassiter, of course.

The foreman, with all the resources of the two packs, turned his new mount northwestward. He wondered about certain paces which this horse did not give at peculiar pressures of the knee or flicks of the reins, or words unaccompanied. Yet Gila Joe was looking a long way forward —and to love. Claire waited! No matter what queer semi-reasons seemed to draw him this way and that in pursuit of other interests, he would have to concentrate upon that back trail into Arizona, to the Gila River, to the Gila Bend ranch where a girl waited.

At the same moment, Wallace Braden, his necessary information hastily gleaned at Bender, galloped southward over the stage trail like one who dreads the pursuit of a demon.

Chapter XIV

Fires of Loyalty

BEFORE that day had brightened to mid-forenoon, Gila Joe realized that the sixty miles to Kendrick were far from possible for him to negotiate. Three miles out, at Colbert's Spring, an alkaline mudhole but the last water he could find for twenty miles, he had washed the wound in his scalp ruthlessly, and thoroughly, then bound the deep furrow with a more durable bandage made from strips of a clean shirt. But soon he swayed in the saddle. When he shut his eyes, attempting to hide the ache in his brain from the brassy glare of the sun, he nearly fell off, without being aware of the fact that he was losing equilibrium.

Once he stopped, looked back over the six-foot greasewood toward Bender.

"Seems like there was suthin'—" he ruminated aloud. "Perhaps I'd've done better to put up there till tomorrow."

Whatever it was that he had forgotten,

however, no more than a troublesome, insistent urge to recall it took definite shape. He lumped this exasperation with the ache of concussion, and paid it less attention. He turned, kneed the horse into an ambling stride. A half-smile surmounted the pain in his narrowed eyes as he searched the horizon to the northwest.

Fate, in the form of an enemy, had played a peculiar joke upon him, and, as it proved, upon the perpetrator of that joke. The man, holding the horn of his high sadle, and allowing his head to droop, thought wearily of a dry camp somewhere along the trail. It would be best to make a third of a half of the distance to Kendrick, however, since there was no telling how he would be upon the morrow. Already a flush had grown beneath the tan of his cheeks. His forehead felt dry and hot. When he removed his two-gallon hat the sweatband rimmed the felt, hard and dry. Fever. Yes, he felt it in his muscles, in the ninety-a-minute beat of the pulse about the raw edges of the wound.

Ensued a moment or two of blankness. Then he caught himself, straightened abruptly, swigged a half-pint of tepid water from the canteen, and strove for a better grip upon himself. That must have been mighty near a faint. Once he had seen Andy— Andy what? Well, it didn't matter—didn't matter—saw Andy keel over like an opened sack of flour. A—someone—had cut into his thumb, bone deep, with a razor-like bowie used for whittling. Gila Joe never had fainted. It had seemed before like a fault of weaklings.

He stared about him with eyes that had dulled with a glaze almost like that of death. He saw foggy shapes; a grotesque Joshua tree contorted like a warped crucifix; a scurrying figure hurrying elusively for a further screen—actually no more than a furtive coyote surprised in its lair.

He could not see far enough toward the horizon to suspect the happening that was imminent. Ahead, coming toward him on the very trail he traveled, was a tiny dust cloud no larger than one of the coy twister devils which coned up from the dust raised by the feet of his own mount, to vanish in the chaparral. Every atom of his concentration now was required that he might retain his seat. Slowly, as two or three of the odd blank spaces came and went, and the internally generated heat of his fever vied more and more with the calorics of a merciless sun, he began to mutter aloud, and nod his head—very, very slowly, since the illusion fastened upon him that, if once he shook his head or jarred it suddenly, it must burst like an outcandled egg.

"Would've been better to've stay—stayed," he conceded, pronunciation clouding. "Never make town. Huh, talk like I was drunk. Ain't!"

The terse affirmation came forth with waggish seriousness.

"Ain't drunk. Nope. Wisht'ell I was. Guess I better——"

The horse took ten or twelve plodding steps before Gila Joe could summon the remnant of his decision. He goggled at a wall of crumbling rock which bordered the trail here for the length of a shallow gulch. Then suddenly losing both wooden stirrups, he slid off in a heap.

The impact of the fall jarred him into a grimacing semi-consciousness. Lifting his head with an effort, he cocked up a glance of wryness and acknowledgment of supreme bodily misery, at the horse.

"Guess this is where—where we e-elect to camp, old-timer, old hoss," he conceded, stifling a groan. Before he even could crawl to the shade, he fainted.

THE trail of her father, Stephen Lassiter, had been an astonishing thing to Claire, especially as he had made no attempt to disguise his identity; and because, only a day ahead of her, Wallace Braden also followed the same trail. The girl had not been able to imagine for one instant the reason which had sent her father forth on this sudden, unannounced journey.

True, he had been moody, inexplicably savage over trifles, at times, ever since Joe broke jail and escaped. Claire knew, or thought she knew, at least, the full hatred her beloved parent bore for that only other man she ever had loved.

In a way, such an intensity of wrath sent shivers down the girl's slim length. It smacked of an obsession, monomania. Gila Joe certainly had repaid, by honest work on the range, the cost of all the comforts Stephen Lassiter had provided for the orphan boy. The elder Braden, too, had been a stanch friend of Stephen Lassiter. Why, then, should the latter turn upon the half-adopted lad, son of his old friend, merely because of an accusation of murder, never proved? Or because of anything as inevitable as love between Claire and the man? Especially since the murdered man,

father of Wallace Braden, had been famed for his close connivings, alleged outlawry and general disreputable use of fine abilities?

Since Joe's departure Claire had reached the dignity of her eighteenth birthday. Though for three years and more she had worn her long tresses neatly coifed in a fluffy style which suited an ardent, natural wave, since the day he had left the house she had braided the locks, drawing them stiffly back from her forehead, then, for convenience when she rode, wrapping them in a quadruplet of heavy ropes about the crown of her head.

Now, wearing a low-crowned Stetson, large enough to conceal all of her hair except a little over her ears and a few of the ringlets above the tanned nape of her rounded, slender neck, she rode southeastward. It was the eighth day of a trip which had been hard for her, even with that ease and grace of horsemanship which was the heritage of thorough training for pleasure in the saddle. If only she had known, could have guessed the reason which had sent her grim relative on this seemingly senseless journey.

Wallace, even, said nothing. She suspected his reason, however. For months he had suggested subtly, now and then, that he would be overjoyed to bear the name of Lassiter rightfully as his own; would strive to please old Stephen as a son in case the man wished to make out formal papers of adoption. Doubtless he would have done just that, and failed. Stephen Lassiter could gauge men better than the youngster even dreamed.

While Wallace still had his living and an allowance given to him for no more than sporadic work upon the ranch, while he was countenanced as the rather unimportant nephew of a real man to whom Lassiter owed a debt of long friendship, the place of pensioner was exactly the reason for remaining. As suitor for the hand of Claire, or as one who expected adoption and said so straight out, Wallace's tenure and comforts would have come to an abrupt end.

Claire knew that he failed to realize the fact, though; imagined that now, with Joe out of the way for good and all, Stephen Lassiter would have to depend more and more upon him in his declining years. Worry over something like this had sent the young man hotfooting upon Stephen Lassiter's trail. Claire's lip curled in scorn. He was worried, was he? She had been forced into a knowledge of the elder man's last will and testament, though protesting tearfully that she did not care to know anything which even suggested that her dearest daddy did not expect and hope to stay with her always.

By the terms of that brief document, Wallace Braden was insured a small income for life, provided he worked at something productive at least six months of each calendar year! Since his actual labor, inefficient and half-hearted as it always had been, figured to no more than one day's application in a week, the revelation of this bequest sometime was bound to mean a stiff jolt. It would lie in Claire's hands, as bondless executrix, to determine if Wallace lived up to the demand. Though she hated to think of the eventuality, that young man would have to live up to scratch strictly; she despised men, imitation men, who evaded issues. And this was not entirely the romanticism of a young woman. In the wide desert and range of the Gila River region were men and pack-rats and rattlesnakes. She had seen and knew them all. Sometimes species was hard to determine.

Wallace Braden's wily, impromptu scheme, formed after the wounding of Gila Joe, boomeranged with a vengeance. From quite a distance Claire saw Joe's horse standing with lowered head. Then she discerned the prostrate figure. What was wrong? Surely no one could choose a rut of the trail, open to the sun, for a *siesta*, unless he was drunk. Possibly he was dead.

Claire Lassiter wore no spurs, but she needed none. As the thought of a possible injury to the man ahead crossed her mind, she clamped two-inch military heels into the flanks of her stocky paint pony. The Indian mare, trained as a pet, sprang into a furlong-devouring dead run within three seconds. Why the race she did not know. Enough that her mistress desired the last notch of speed. She gave it. There probably would be no lumps of sugar on this long, arduous ride; yet she delivered her best. Such is another brand of loyalty, scarcely less fine.

Claire came upon Gila Joe. Bending over him, she simply halted in mid-thought, mid-action. Her breath stopped, as almost did her heart. There was nothing theatrical on the surface, though below that face which paled, below the gentle swell of girlish bosom, there was a tensing of surprise, horror, excitement, hope, paralyzing fear.

For three long seconds Claire Lassiter, after she knew, stared. The pupils of her

eyes dilated, even in that sun glare. As a result, the eyes themselves swam in a blinding film of moisture sent involuntarily and merely as a protection. Joe Braden! Wounded!

She knew immediately that he was not dead. In dazed fashion his eyes opened, staring uncomprehendingly in a fever of sun and torture. He muttered words inarticulate, words which tumbled one into another like falling dominoes.

Drunk, too? Claire decided *that* once and for all by her keen olfactory sense. Though all men indulged more or less, as she believed and knew, she had the old-time Southern detestation of bestial drunkenness. But Gila Joe had not the faintest trace of liquor upon his breath.

Claire lifted his head, laid her cheek against his burning one. Then suddenly, fiercely, she kissed him; once, twice, thrice. The last kiss had a duration greater than double the two which had gone before. In that space of seconds something odd happened to Claire Lassiter. She had been pretty, sought-for, irresponsible. Of a sudden then she quieted. This was her man; though let him try to find out that fact! He was unconscious now.

THE end of the third morning following, Cussemout Crandall came. The old driver sang and expatiated alternately. Snugly ensconced within the otherwise empty coach Cussemout's returning express messenger slumbered off the effects of three pints of redeye, imbibed at ten cents a throw to the shocking diminution of his residue of pay.

Cussemout still was lit; in effect he was a veteran, desert-dried Gay White Way all to himself. Of course, he was not drunk. There are way stations on that hilarious line, and Cussemout was handling the reins. Still, he was eloquent, full of the desire to gesture and spout. If only he had known declamations like "The Cross of Gold," and "Spartacus to the Gladiators," he would have scrambled those oratorical eggs effectively.

The best Cussemout had at his command was a soliloquy oddly apt to the case of the man and girl he was to discover at the roadside:

"To be—or not to wasadamn'bit;
That's the whill-goolied quesshun!
Whether——"

But his paraphrase of the great soliloquy was to wait its next repetition. Cussemout saw something. It was a camp—or something like a camp, anyway. Nobody in his seven or eight or nine senses ever camped out here on the dry desert edge, if he knew what he was doing. And there looked to be something darned, iggle-wufflin' funny about that camp. A man an' a girl, hey? The guy was laid out, sorta. Well, let's take a look.

When old Cussemout saw the features of the man, now sleeping and fairly on the road to normality and convalescence, the stage driver drew a quick breath. For a moment his vocabulary absolutely deserted him. He gestured oddly, throwing his fingers in whorls about his spreading ears.

Several minutes. Then he asked a question.

"He b'longs south. Kin he travel in a couple or three hours when he wakes up?"

"I think so. A little way, at any rate."

Then, "How'd yuh git water?"

"I rode for it."

Cussemout considered, nodded approval. He did not speak again for some time, which was unusual. Though his brain was clearing rapidly, a crush of considerations flooded upon him. He liked the looks of this fresh-skinned, girlish youngster. Somehow her face seemed faintly familiar, though he could not place the similarity. She had taken charge of a difficult situation in straightforward range style. How much did she know about the man, however?

Haltingly, because of the fact that he deleted a full half of his usual lurid vocabulary, Cussemout asked concerning the circumstances. Claire answered frankly enough, though not mentioning the reason for her trip into this border country. She had come upon Gila Joe wounded. He still had been hazy, seemed out of his head from fever, though this had subsided quickly. Evidently he had been wounded by a gunshot on the morning of three days before, though by whom and why she had not discovered. A time or two he appeared without fever, and quite normal, albeit unable or unwilling to talk. In truth, the three days had brought back full memory to the man. Remembering everything had given Gila Joe more to puzzle over than had the state of daze, however.

The stage driver pursed his wrinkled lips. He thought he knew. A quick survey of Gila Joe's effects made this a certainty.

"He was totin' a sizeable wad of chink, ma'am," suggested Cussemout. "Y'ain't seen nothin' of a box or bag—gold, I reckon?"

Claire shook her head. There had been nothing of this sort; she had used all the facilities of his modest outfit.

"That means robbery, then," she concluded slowly.

"Thet's what we'll have to prove."

And though Cussemout disregarded her queries for a while then, his brain was functioning clearly at last, rid of the alcoholic fumes. He knew himself forced to go on to Kendrick for the gold which would pay Squirrel Emery for the 5-o ranch, a payment which the old, black-coated stranger had to make soon or forfeit the five thousand already paid. The bank at Bender had not received the shipment, which waited, of course, for the weekly trip of the stage. Lassiter had made arrangements with the express company to ship it straight through to Foley.

This was Cussemout's chief responsibility. He had another, however. Gila Joe could not return to Bender. In that town a deputy sheriff wanted to arrest him instantly. If he did go, doubtless he would be lynched, as an absconder, before any sort of defense could be arranged. Popular sentiment in the Southwest was for quick action, even when the lack of deliberation occasioned a useless hanging or two.

"We'll do this, ma'am," at length concluded Cussemout, briefly explaining why Gila Joe had better avoid the town of Bender. "I'm goin' on to Kendrick, but I'll be back pronto. Then all of us'll ride down to Foley, where Gila Joe b'longs. Was you bound thetaway?"

"I'm looking for my father," said Claire slowly. "He may have passed through Bender, and headed in that direction."

Of a sudden the old driver's casual glance concentrated. He studied with renewed interest and admiration the warm-tinted oval of face. He nodded.

"Yuh'll find him down to Foley, Miss Lassiter," he said.

With their patient, Claire Lassiter, old Cussemout, and the uninterested express messenger had driven on several miles before a sudden thought struck Cussemout.

"By Hickey!" he exclaimed half-aloud. "If she takes Gila Joe back, an' old Lassiter throws down on him——"

But Cussemout had no fears or sympathy for Gila Joe Braden.

Chapter XV

IN THE NIGHT

THE plan adopted was simple; it was promulgated and carried into execution by Cussemout. Gila Joe could not be taken to Bender, the nearest town, because his defense, if he really had one, ought to be offered to Squirrel Emery and the authorities at Foley. The stage could not go back immediately, owing to the necessity of bringing the express shipment of gold from the bank at Kendrick, a town farther to the northwest. Therefore Gila Joe and Claire were taken to a waterhole on the stage route. They would wait here another full day for Cussemout's return.

During the process of lifting him from the stage at the Colander Spring waterhole, a spring now in name only, Gila Joe awoke. He straightened, seized a thin, corded arm which had been supporting one shoulder, and jerked his feet loose from the hold of the indifferent express messenger, who let go and yawned, looking at the erstwhile burden incuriously. Gila Joe saw Claire instantly, but he had glimpsed and known her before. He smiled one-sidedly, noting however that the girl's eyes were serious.

Turning, then, he met the unflinching, rather inimical regard of old Cussemout. The stage driver had no particular esteem for this gunman. Cussemout might laud the exploits of Gila Joe impartially. In such a recital he even would grant the other the benefit of every doubt in respect to the missing money, yet he was not counted in the small number of the foreman's personal friends. The old-timer had uppermost in his mind the thought of a real friend, the veteran Lassiter, who had tipped many glasses with Cussemout, had done the latter many a friendly favor, and who had come to this South country for the evident reason of trying conclusions with Gila Joe through the smoke of spouting guns.

At first, when learning the identity of the girl who had spent three days caring for the wounded foreman, Cussemout was shocked by his first notion of what the possible reason might be for old Stephen Lassiter journeying to face a killer gunman famed for his speed and accuracy. Could it be that there existed some sinister reason; Miss Lassiter and Gila Joe——

But for all his picturesque vocabulary and a moral personal life, Cussemout was of the real West. He bit his tongue as if it had voiced the sacrilegious thought.

"Damn fool! Damn liar! She's not that kind!" he swore beneath his breath.

No. Whatever Gila Joe might have done, might deserve to get for his past crimes, if any or many, this little girl's face, while expressing an ability to form and hold her own convictions even to the point where they merged with perversity and self-will, no more could be mentioned in the same breath with indecency and scandal than could the Holy Hallowed Howlers of Heejus!

Miss Lassiter was just about the prettiest and sweetest young woman old Cussemout ever had glimpsed. He held a faint mental reservation for a girl of many decades agone whose very last name he long since had forgotten, but who once had stroked his hair and kissed him. Outside of Lucy, though— Well, maybe she'd even give Lucy a run for the money if the two were put side by side now. And that was the greatest compliment, though unspoken, Claire Lassiter could have wrung from old Cussemout, for it questioned the incomparability of his only honest romance.

"I didn't steal that money, and no one stole it from me. A few tried. I'll bring it back to Squirrel," announced Gila Joe. His voice was inaudible to anyone farther distant.

An astounded question sprang to the old man's features. "Yuh don't say!" he gasped in a whisper. "A'right, Gila Joe, I call yuh on that. I'll be back along, day after tomorrow. Yuh'll be here?"

"With the money for my dear employer, Squirrel," answered Gila Joe. "I shore want to win my fifty-dollar bonus!" There was irony in his voice, yet no whit less of determination. For his own sense of right and self-respect the foreman would deliver that money—he remembered now where it was placed—and then go somewhere else with his capital and this girl. Thus far he did not know that Claire had not ridden down expressly to find him. Fortunately for some maturity of his plans, he was not to learn for a time to come.

"My girl," he said, as the stage drove away northward from the stage route waterhole to get the money which would settle the terms of Stephen Lassiter's purchase inside the stipulated time limit, "some parts of this still seem strange to me. Won't you tell me the whole thing? I love you. Well, maybe first I should give you a look at the game I have been playing.

"I didn't kill my uncle—and I haven't the slightest idea who did. How that piece of my spur got there, I don't know. I still don't believe it could have been mine. Up to that time every man who knew me must have believed that if I wished to kill him I would grant him an even break, or better, on the draw. I have been cursed in a way, Claire, by knowing myself faster than ordinary with the six-gun. Many times I have waited. Even when I had a clear case, was insulted—like with Louie Wrenn—I gave the other man a touch of his weapon before I drew and shot. Still I have wondered. I don't wish to kill anyone. Some very slow men are alive today because I had no thirst for their lives. Can't you believe me on that much, Claire?"

She straightened, almost smiled. At least there was a lessening of her slight frown, which was a frown of seriousness, not a condemnation, though Gila Joe scarcely dared to believe that much in his new mental clarity. Perhaps a hint of easy color crept upward beneath the tan of her cheeks.

"I am glad you did not take that money, Joe," she said, giving him her hand in a firm grip of confidence and comradeship. "Knowing what you must have been through, I—I might even have believed that, perhaps; though no one in the world ever could have made me think that you shot your uncle."

"No," said Joe, halted intangibly in the pursuit of a declaration which must have brought a definite avowal or refusal from the girl. "I have had a funny sort of job, dear. Maybe yuh wouldn't understand, exactly. Down across the line my bad luck petered out. I was plumb fortunate. I made some money right easy—enough even to start out owning my own brand, prob'ly. I almost bought in somewhere and sent for yuh. Then I started thinking. Yore daddy maybe was right part of the way. He most usually is. Ever since he took me in as a little shaver I've had a real easy time, working, course, but knowing all the time I could slide along like—like some others, maybe—and still bunk in the ranch-house instead of with the other bands.

"So I did something else. I heard about the Soap Bubble ranch and the hombre who owns it. He's a sort of special case. They told me, afore I went up there to hit him for a ticket, that anybody who

could get along with Squirrel Emery would call a pack-rat a generous trading son-of-a-gun. I've been Squirrel's foreman now for some months. I made the trip to Bender before; so Squirrel hasn't any right to be giving out now that I vamosed with the money. It'll go back to him O. K., with my compliments." One fist tightened unconsciously, indicating, perhaps, what the nature of his respects would be. "Then I reckon, girl, I'll have pretty near to a clean slate to hold up. Yuh can write any darn thing on it yuh want to."

"What made you think," asked Claire, lowering her long eyelashes to hide a glint of mischief mixed with the pride and belief, "that I wanted to muss it up in any way?"

Gila Joe straightened. He glanced long and earnestly at her, but she preserved an admirable air of indifference while she proceeded with the multitudinous details of camp making. His shoulders gradually dropped from their high slope.

"Didn't yuh—come down here to—to—find me?" he asked, incredulous, yet becoming more and more embarrassed as each word revealed to him the possible heights of his naive assumption.

"I most certainly did not, Joe Braden!" she retorted. "I had no idea in the wide world that you were in this region!" And though something of a smile was hidden deep in her eyes, the man who had ridden with an image of her in his heart and mind for many weeks failed in his inexperience to see, to understand any such facet of reserve.

For a long time, as the shadows from the purpling crest of the Floridas crept eastward yard by yard, he sat by himself, backed by the roll of blankets which would make his couch. Then a little later he arose to water the horses.

Claire had just about reached the end of the amusement possible to obtain from coquetry. How serious and grim this laughing boy had become in a few short months! She looked at him there, caring for the two beasts bearing the Gila Bend brand, and almost went over to tell him he had misconstrued her meaning. Yet she refrained, and a moment later was sorry—wondering.

Gila Joe led both mounts behind the chaparral, which here rose shoulder high. She thought he meant to tether the animals where herbage offered a modicum of grazing. Instead she suddenly saw him mount a saddled animal. Riding out, he doffed his sombrero in a rather stiff gesture.

"I'll be back some time tonight, ma'am," he told her in a voice of studied impersonality. His glance did not search for her eyes. And he swung away.

"Joe!" she cried, suddenly frightened. "Where are you going? Joe!" He was not fit to fork a horse.

He reined momentarily.

"I'll be back, prob'ly, ma'am," he repeated studiously. "No need to worry none. If I ain't around by daybreak don't wait for me. I won't be coming. Good-by, Claire."

Before she could find words of adequate remonstrance, he had touched flicks of spur ratchets to his mount and swept away into the shadows at a pace which would put a mile or more of distance between them before the girl possibly could saddle and ride in pursuit.

Claire did not make a move toward her horse. She stood as if petrified. How in the name of heaven could he have taken her that seriously? Had the last vestige of a sense of humor deserted him? Did he expect a girl who had not been pledged outright to him, except secretly, to chase two or three hundred miles in pursuit of him? No matter how terrible she might have missed him, might have wished to have done just that, the traditions of Southern pride, of which she inherited many of the most intense, would have made her scorn the very poignancy of love and accept heartbreak, rather than seem in the slightest degree forward with any man.

Yet now, knowing herself the only human being in an ever widening circle of waste land, she sank down and stared unseeingly as the bacon in the pan sizzled and smoked to a charred crisp. Then, inconsequently, she wept.

AT DAWN Gila Joe returned—before the sun had singed the eastern horizon. He left behind him a slowly smothering *moso*, the inhabitant of the identical hotel room in which the foreman a few mornings earlier had cached the contents of the steel lock-box when he rode forth on the decoy trip to the mesa. Albert Brown, as the mixed blood called himself, knew the reputed demon by sight, and had heard the talk in the town concerning Gila Joe's latest and most surely criminal exploit. To awaken from a sound sleep of full stomach and

comfortable digestion to find a single candle lighted in his room and to see the uncompromising face of the outlaw bending over him, was sufficient to awe the uncourageous Albert Brown into a shivering, flabby mass. A reward was on this intruder's head. What could he want of a poor *moso?*

"M-my money is in—in my s-sock, under my p-pillow!" stammered Albert, his voice shaking. He raised his head and leaned to one side, gratuitously assisting the robbery, if such were Gila Joe's plan.

The latter made no move to attach the small horde. He spoke incisively, even if his voice barely reached a whisper. The *moso* would not be robbed, would not be harmed even, in spite of his many crimes; Gila Joe took these offenses entirely for granted, knowing certain assumptions to be perfectly safe.

"Y-yes! *Bueno, señor!*" Albert positively wiggled in his anxiety to please. It was the most dangerous position in which he ever had found himself.

The gunman's specifications sounded simple. Albert would draw the blanket tightly over his head, and remain thus for an hour. No matter what he saw or heard, he must not move in peril of his life.

Albert obeyed to the end of his abilities. Strange creaks, as of rusty nails drawn from boards; the almost noiseless stepping about of a man who moved catlike; the occasional tinkle of spurs, came to his ears through the blanket. What it all meant he could not attempt to fathom. If only he were left there alive he did not care, either. The money, ninety-two American dollars, still lay beneath his head. That might be left, possibly; the *Americano* did not seem to care about it at all.

The breathing became worse and worse there under the blanket. Albert sweated; cautiously, very cautiously, he lifted the folds above his nose and mouth. How long had he lain there? Had the intruder gone?

Actually Gila Joe, the first dash from Bender completed without the sign of any pursuit, had forgotten his trembling victim. There were other, more important considerations. Claire had pushed him beyond arm's length, even though he had not contemplated as much as kissing her lips while they two were alone in camp there on the desert. He wanted to; craved her, in fact, as only strong men unsated with women can want the ones they love.

So great was the man's respect, however, that Claire, bothered far more by pride than by mere conventions which make a man and a girl, camping alone, stilted and impersonal strangers until some third person appears, sensed but did not fully understand his attitude. In matters of man and man Gila Joe was direct to the point of violence. In the case of herself and the man she loved, Claire was willing to waive all minor follies of the conventions; gave no thought to them, in fact.

However, he might have urged his suit instead of taking so many things for granted! She loved him; but, as before when no word even as definite as his appellations of this day had passed, she knew that for the good of her own soul, and his especially, tacit understanding could never take the place of an outright courtship. If she seemed cheapened to him all the delight of love and requited yearning which tingled in every cell of her being might seem less than the lifelong climax of existence it should be.

Gila Joe rode in. His first act, after dismounting, was to cache the canvas sack and oiled paper package, the gold and banknotes, in a place where neither would be disturbed. On leaving, he had not been sure that he would return. The break seemed too deep. Now he looked, misery in his gold-flecked eyes, toward the spot in the chaparral where he supposed Claire had rolled up. He could not go there now.

On the ride back from Bender he had absolved Claire. She had not thought of him through the many nights, many weeks of nights, as he had remembered her. He had only the belief in her love to carry forward as a torch. She could love any of a dozen men who had evinced a great interest in her; some of them were decent, hard-riding cowboys from neighboring ranches, who would not have doffed their Stetsons or sombreros willingly to a milloinairess if they did not respect the woman behind the millions. Fortune-hunters were scarce then in the Southwest. The term was not even known. Toady, a man who acted like Wallace Braden, was called.

Gila Joe was tired from the long ride and return. Still, he could not turn in even to sleep an hour. The impulse to go away, to ride back, deliver the money to Squirrel Emery and then vanish over the horizon, had ebbed. His life was with this girl. She was several years his junior. Doubtless the requital of romantic emotions which were love to him, had meant only an adventure to her. He loved her. Still, he did not know her as a coquette; and he looked darkly upon a prospect which

to any man who had called him friend must have seemed lacking in the most ephemeral cloud.

PERHAPS there is a sense in mankind which cannot be gainsaid by the nonsense of puzzling about love. Gila Joe, forlorn, believing himself less than the dust beneath the chariot wheels of a proud young woman driver, came to the dying embers of a fire. And there, sleeping with her cheeks still tear-stained, was the woman! She had not eaten, had not touched the skillet or coffee pot.

Gila Joe looked a long minute, then slowly turned, his face working oddly between a new and overpowering delight and the stumbling adumbrations of a man who has loved once and just has found reason to believe that his opportunities for happiness have gone by the board.

He smiled one-sidedly. His own blankets lay near at hand. He lifted them, became cognizant then that they had not been washed for three weeks, and then searched farther for the girl's saddle roll. A moment later he enswathed her slender form with the double thickness of straight combed wool.

Then he stood erect. What more could he do? The horizon to the east was reddening. Of a sudden a notion came. One of his own blankets was requisitioned, and a pair of manzanita shrubs. Over these, as a screen, he draped the blanket. It blocked the rays of the new sun. For at least two hours more Claire would not feel the burn of the rays across her eyelids. She might sleep.

She did. She slept almost three hours. Then, when her beginning restlessness told the silent watcher that she would be awake within a quarter hour more, Gila Joe grinned to himself and placed on the coals of a tiny fire the cleaned skillet and the coffee pot. The skillet contained a batch of eight pan biscuits which had been given a chance to puff up to unbelievable lightness.

Claire did not awaken readily. The first hours of her sleep had not rested her appreciably. When she lifted her head and opened her eyes it was to confront a smiling Gila Joe, a young, light-hearted man who balanced a big tin cup and a tin plate on which reposed four strips of broiled, lean bacon, and three hot pan biscuits. The coffee had one teaspoon of sugar already stirred, as she liked it. But beyond all these surprises, Claire Lassiter flicked open her clear eyes to see a man to whom, in the night, a sense of humor seemed to have returned. Perhaps it never had left. She had been wrong on some things, before.

"Cussemout will be along in a few hours," said Gila Joe, cheerfully. "Yuh won't mind?" And he fished beneath the roll which had formed the pillow for Claire Lassiter and brought forth the canvas bag and the oiled paper case of banknotes. "I went to get that, last night," he said. "I almost rode back to the south; but honestly, my girl, I'm not going to say another thing until I've proved to yore daddy and all of them that I'm not a murderer. But I have not thought of anyone else but you, Claire, in these weeks, months, years!"

In spite of strong efforts to suppress it, a happy smile flashed to the girl's lips. There was no mistaking the truth when told in this fashion.

"Joe!" she cried, impulsively, and caught him by the forearms.

He would have sworn that she was about to kiss him full on the lips. His muscles corded. He tensed. His eyes closed in the attempt to restrain the nearly overwhelming desire to crush her to himself in one overmastering sweep of his arms.

What he actually received was the slightest perceptible touch of warm, moist lips upon a tingling, square centimeter directly over his left cheekbone.

CHAPTER XVI

THE AVENGER

BEHIND him, Wallace Braden, cousin of Gila Joe, left Bender in a great hurry, taking the southward trail. He was not pursued save by the accusations of a guilty conscience. Until this day he never had dared any open injury to his sterner, more competent relative. Now he had sent Gila Joe to his death. Half-truths! Wallace wondered, with a chilling of skin on his arms, how convincingly he would be able to defend the tale he had told, in case full consciousness and memory returned to Gila Joe.

It did not look like a very defensible bet. Wallace was no mean target shot, yet he never had been called upon to pit his skill and courage against an adversary. Once he had been swept up in the mob spirit of

a hastily gathered posse recruited to pursue three blundering horsethieves, two Mexicans and an outlaw white man. He had ridden with the others on the trail; yet at the brusk, whistling finish, when two of the three were shot down and the third captured, wounded through the groin, and strung up before he could die from the previous cause, Wallace had merited the black looks and suspicions of his fellows.

He had been one of the foremost talkers; yet in the showdown he lay chalky of face and shivering behind a boulder from which his six-gun spoke only occasionally, when fired hastily and without special aim. The men with whom he rode understood well enough. They jostled him aside when he would have taken a place at the end of the rope which would hang the remaining Mexican. Only a profound respect for some others who bore the names of Lassiter and Braden kept some of the range men at that time from showing their feelings more plainly.

To a horseman who did not spare his mount the way was not long. Sure that no one was coming on his back trail, Wallace camped that evening—the first night which Claire and Joe spent at the dry camp. Next morning at the first streak of dawn he was on his way. Shortly after noon he passed the empty stage northward bound. Cussemout and the messenger both returned his brief salute and hail. The driver looked him over curiously, judging him bound in haste for Mexico. During past years this trail had been almost devoid of horsemen; only an occasional rider was seen, bound in mad haste for the protection which awaited beyond the border. Of course, an occasional passenger or two used the stage, yet men willing to endure the long arid ride almost invariably were those who avoided as a deadly pestilence any upfling of dust which appeared upon the horizon.

That second evening, Wallace rode into Foley. The town looked little different, unless a trifle more rickety and sprawling, than ten or a dozen cowtowns through which he had passed. One wide main street was fronted by a few stores, a restaurant, a blacksmith shop and livery combined, and seven saloons, distinguishable from the other board buildings by the fact that the saloons were lighted. Music, of the mechanical kind, came from two of the seven. From a third sounded an uproar of voices. A quarrel. Wallace reined toward the quietest of the seven, a saloon frequented mostly by *cholos, mozos* and full-breed Mexicans. Incidentally, this was the place where Stephen Lassiter and Cussemout had gone for privacy their first night in Foley.

Wallace ordered a drink, mixed in gingerly with the chaser, then drank both glasses in mincing, precise swallows.

"I am searching for a certain man I have reason to believe came in this direction," began Wallace, wiping his lips.

"The hell yuh say!"

"Yes." Wallace gave no sign of noting the other's standoffish belligerency. Many men had seemed to dislike him; he was used to that; sniffed at it, once he was able to throw the dust of the town behind him.

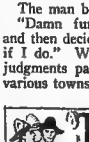
Now he proceeded rapidly to tell of Stephen Lassiter. Wallace characterized the elder man with what passed for broad humor among the uncritical.

This bartender, remembering instantly the customer who had unlimbered his heavy Spracklin there on the scarred cherry bar, and who now had become a part of the life of Foley, told willingly enough of Stephen Lassiter. Sure, the old guy had come here, all right. He'd stayed. Reckon he must've hid some tall coin under them black coat-tails of his'n, because he'd done gone and bought the Soap Bubble ranch from Squirrel Emery. And if anyone there could vouch for the nature of Squirrel, Lassiter must have kittied up a whacking good price. Squirrel always scraped clean the insides of his nuts bfore he threw them away.

In the course of the bartender's unexpectedly voluminous exposition, Wallace Braden automatically threw down the price of two drinks and waved the man in the soiled apron first pouring of the liquor. Wallace himself, at the same time puzzled and delighted that his quest had ended here, sloshed out a bare two fingers, and left it standing on the bar when he left.

The man behind the cherry stared.

"Damn funny hombre," he observed, and then decided, "I don't like him; damn if I do." Which was an epitome of the judgments passed by many other men in various towns of the range country.



IN THE Cactus Spine saloon, one of the more frequented places, Wallace heard more of the "tough old buzzard," the term used, not disrespectfully, to designate Stephen Lassiter in this town of observing men. More,

the newcomer learned with little difficulty and at the expenditure of no more than the price of three or four drinks, that Lassiter made it a rule to ride in some time between ten o'clock and midnight. Occasionally he gambled a few dollars on faro or roulette. More rarely he sat in for an hour at one of the rather sparsely patronized poker tables, though never on Saturday night when these ran full blast.

He was a good card player, albeit one to whom losings or winnings in the ten dollar take-out games did not seem to matter one way or the other. Probably he had enough money anyway, seeing he had bought out Squirrel Emery, and now was planning to employ only white men on the old Soap Bubble. Mexicans and half-breed *vaqueros*, in this South country, could be hired for little more than half the price asked by American men.

Wallace amused himself. He played five two-dollar bets on one of the roulette wheels, winning once. This gave him a sizeable edge. He thought a while, then tossed up a dull edged double eagle to the bar and bought a drink for the house. This brought a moment of not unflattering attention from several of the beneficiaries, though many of the men scarcely glanced at him.

Then he settled himself to wait. A sure instinct bade him not to ride to this newly acquired ranch of his erstwhile guardian. In a public place, no matter how unwelcome a visitor from his home might seem, Stephen Lassiter would not create a scene; not for small cause, at any rate. So Wallace watched the poker, wagered and lost three unimportant bets on the faro layout, staked again a series of two-dollar wagers on the wheel of fortune, but did not win.

At ten-thirty by the fly-specked clock above the bar, a tall, dignified figure strode in, Stephen Lassiter. He did not turn his head, but nodded curtly to a pair of ranch owners who occupied one end of the bar, then passed beyond to a vacant space.

"Mix two juleps, suh," he bade the bartender in a low but distinct tone.

As if at a signal several heads turned. This was a nightly formality. Stephen Lassiter refused to drink alone. He pursued the rigid belief even to the point of courteously inviting some ignominious barfly to partake of his hospitality. Foley got something of a kick and a smile out of seeing which one of the indigent ones received the two tall drinks in succession provided by the tall oldster in the black coat. Stephen Lassiter with his enormous revolvers and his queer notions, which other Southerners of Foley and the range respected, however, was in the way of becoming one of the best traditions of this raw town.

The barkeep here smiled and nodded acquiescence, happy to employ a trifle of art in the humdrum routine of splashing forth whisky, gin, and "heavy" port wine with accompanying chasers of seltzer, ginger ale or water. He dove down into the mystic depths of the cabinet, emerging with two tall glasses and four semi-withered sprigs of fresh mint. He swept these to the bar, the mint on a thick, vitreous plate, then assembled a mixing glass, graduate, two long stirring rods of glass, and a conglomeration of bottles large and small from the little used stock of the Cactus Spine.

Now, after several previous chances to practise, the julep went quite as Stephen Lassiter demanded, and with celerity. Within four minutes by the jaded old clock, the two strong whisky-minted containers of delicious beverage were clumped in front of the veteran, whose iron visage relaxed a trifle in satisfaction.

As usual he turned slowly, majestically about, twirling one tip of his white mustache. The bar-flies, and some others who were curious to taste this beverage but too proud to order the same either in Lassiter's presence or absence, stood alert.

"Hrrrrmph!" began Lassiter. "Ah wondah if any of you gentlemen would do me the honah——"

The sentence broke cold in his throat. He looked upon a face he really detested, that of Wallace Braden. The young man strode across, his thin face wreathed in smiles and his hand extended. Stephen Lassiter said something beneath his breath; but he met, rather hesitantly, the welcoming hand of greeting.

"What ah you doing heah? Will you join me, suh?" he asked, indicating the two filled glasses.

Wallace agreed effusively. He waited before explaining his mission, which actually would have to be told at length and with circumlocutions. Stephen Lassiter most palpably seemed in possession of every one of his senses. He might not take it kindly that one of his wards had thought it necessary to trail him across the halves of two Territories in order to save him from possible indiscretions.

The newcomer was saved explanations, however. By the time Stephen Lassiter had assimilated two of the concoctions, and

watched Wallace Braden get outside of the other two, the elder man needed to ask nothing more. Added to the liquor he had drunk previously, the strong mixtures quite addled Wallace Braden. He hiccoughed, slapped Stephen on the back, and started to make a general ass of himself.

Catching one covert grin, the old-timer soon put an end to the display.

"We can talk ovah things much bettah out at the ranch," he broke in firmly, taking Wallace by the elbow. "You will ride ovah with me, suh."

Wallace was ready enough to agree. He could stick to his horse, but little more. When he descended at the 5-0, Stephen had to help him from the saddle and across the low stoop to the ranch-house. The white-haired man's lip curled in disgust. A man of this youth unable to hold even a trifle of liquor!

There, before Wallace's rather myopic gaze, and to interrupt the youth's footless babbling, Stephen Lassiter dramatically brought forth one of the huge Spracklin five-shots, puffed through the barrel, and reloaded.

"Puhhaps you did not know, being new down heah," he said, "what my reason was foh buying this ranch?"

"No, damn'fidid, Uncle," Wallace mouthed in owlish negation.

"Well, theah was one thing decided me," continued the other, turning half away to hide his revulsion. "Gila Joe Braden—they call him that now, down thisaway—is fohman of this ranch. Joe is away now, but he aims to come back some time, Ah reckon. When he does——"

Stephen Lassiter snap-locked the Spracklin, with an ominous gesture.

With a little less liquor in his system, Wallace Braden might have been discreet. Now he smiled, chuckled, laughed outright over a joke he could not explain, and which, for the moment, he could not bring to mind in all its parts. Fine joke on Old Joe, on'y he wasn't coming back to appreciate it!

A DAY passed at the 5-0; then another day. Wallace found himself able to appreciate the joke. It still brought the trace of a smile to his thin, petulantly curved lips, even though he did not remember the fact that he had told parts of it, and other facts which he had intended to preserve always as tight-locked secrets, to his guardian. Somehow Stephen seemed to avoid him. Wallace had not found an opportunity to suggest that a man could have no real use for two ranches; that either one or the other ought to be sold for what it would bring on the present rather favorable market.

There was no hurry, however. From the other white cowpunchers of the 5-0 Wallace learned the truth concerning Gila Joe's mission. Bitterly then the youthful newcomer reproached himself a second time for not searching Joe Braden's effects more thoroughly. The man must have had that money with him, unless the Mexican who shot him down made away with it. Wallace doubted that. There had not been time for a marauder to seek anything and get on horseback so quickly. No, Gila Joe now was riding northwestward to his own certain doom, and carrying something like twenty thousand dollars belonging either to Stephen Lassiter or Squirrel Emery.

Wallace, unable to pin down Stephen Lassiter to anything like an extended conversation, finally sought out the rodent-toothed ex-owner of the ranch. Squirrel, after Wallace had made known that his visit was not exactly a casual affair, grudgingly brought forth liquor. Then ensued the peculiar spectacle of two men, neither of whom liked liquor for its own sake, drinking to some extent, each urging on the other, thinking of some ephemeral advantage possible to secure through the loosening of a tongue.

As before, Wallace came out second best. The grinning, mirthless cowman learned several things. Most of all he gauged Wallace Braden as a youth not above the deadline of honesty, a characterless nonentity who might be useful upon occasion. What that occasion might prove to be, Squirrel could not surmise. Still, he counted the evening not ill spent.

And the second evening following, the conference blossomed and bore peculiar fruit. Capper Stern, deputy sheriff, galloped into Foley with a tale which set the entire town agog. Gila Joe was riding back with the stage. He was coming into Foley with every cent of the money he was supposed to have stolen. Somewhere on the trip he had been waylaid and wounded, but had managed to preserve the money belonging to his employer, Squirrel Emery; money which now belonged to the purchaser of the 5-0 ranch, Stephen Lassiter.

Squirrel Emery's heart nearly stopped. He went blue about the mouth corners. His next half-hour was the most agoniz-

ing he ever had spent. The deputy who brought the news promised that by the following sundown Gila Joe would deliver the twenty-one thousand dollars.

Twenty-one thousand! *Arrrh!* And Squirrel knew, too, that on this stage, arriving at least two full days ahead of schedule, must be the express messenger with the remainder of Stephen Lassiter's payment for the ranch. They had cheated him; he was outdone, and by his own grasping hope to cheat another!

But Squirrel had been driven beyond the bounds of endurance. With white flecks showing beneath his sandy mustache in both mouth corners, and a wild light in his narrowed, covetous eyes, he rode out to the ranch which had been his own, and asked for Wallace Braden. Under the starlight the two rode away together, talking long and earnestly in hushed voices.

CHAPTER XVII

LAST RESORT

THE sleepy nature of the express messenger, Ed Allison, companion of Cussemout Crandall, no longer was in evidence. Beneath his seat, back of his heels, rested a sealed oaken chest, brass bound and triple padlocked. Within that chest lay more money than Ed ever had guarded on any trip, Stephen Lassiter's shipment. In addition, however, within an old riding boot thrown with seeming carelessness to one side of the compartment, was still another lump sum of gold and banknotes, Gila Joe's trust, in itself no mean treasure to protect.

Ed was alert and uneasy, for no specific reason. He crouched forward, a sawed-off shotgun extending no farther than the end of his left knee, but ready for instant use. His eyes supplemented the hawk glances of Cussemout, which always searched the scrub and greasewood and stretches of bare alkali, even when nothing more than a fugitive jackrabbit promised to come in sight.

"Nothin' much to worry about, son," assured Cussemout. "Now we're past them Florida foothills, there won't be nobody bother us. I'm hoober-whistlin' glad there wasn't nobody, this trip. From now on we got plain an' open sailin'."

"Uh-huh," agreed Ed, shifting his chew of tobacco, but otherwise not relaxing his vigilance a particle.

He probably was worried unduly. Cussemout had claimed he was. The old driver had been afraid of just one thing; Gila Joe and the girl were riding horseback through the scrub along a trail which paralleled the road, and Cussemout feared they accidentally might come too close at a moment when Ed Allison dozed. Awakening, he might mistake either Gila Joe Braden or Claire Lassiter for a robber, and let go that terrible double load of muzzle-crammed buckshot. Cussemout had helped gather up shreds of two ambitious stick-up artists who had got in front of that wicked weapon, and shuddered at the possibilities. He need not have worried this time, however, as Gila Joe and the girl diverged considerably on a short cut in the trail. Also, Ed Allison, feeling the squirmings of an uneasy premonition, never had been wider awake in his whole life.

Even then he was caught unawares. At one point in the trail the chaparral encroached upon the roadway till the stiff branches scraped the coach sides. Of a sudden, as the team labored up the steep hill, two figures darted forth from opposite sides, shouting in unison the brusque, excited command, "Hands up!"

With a sound somewhere between a grunt and a sigh, Cussemout obeyed. He was not paid to risk his life for other people's money, and rarely did so. Once in a while, granted an even chance for his stake, he enjoyed a gun battle, of course; but this was different. He slouched against the back of the seat, grimacing at the quick thought that now, if this money were stolen, Stephen Lassiter would have the fiend's own time getting down another chest of specie with which to pay off Squirrel Emery within the time limit of fifteen days. Well, it was the old man's bargain, not Cussemout's. These masked men had the drop, and that was sure. One on each side.

Yes, they had planned the robbery well. Before they were seen both had six-guns levelled, and within a few yards of the two men on the front seat. According to all the best stagecoach traditions, the pickings should have been made easily and bloodlessly.

The robbers figured without Ed Allison, the yawning, indifferent figure, the unsuccessful poker player. Ed somehow had expected a happening not unlike this. He had not dreamed that anyone could get within three paces of him, unseen, of course. He heard the command, involun-

tarily almost obeyed it—then came to himself with a snap. To hell with them! The twenty-seven-inch shotgun swung in a short, terrific arc. Two fingers closed upon the curled triggers. In that second a Colt's revolver snapped savagely, but its small voice was drowned in the awesome thunder of a triple charge of powder and lead hurled from each of two bulldog barrels. Though in his seat Ed Allison slumped back, a blue-red star upon his upper lip below his short nose, as the startled horses leaped ahead unreined they left behind one amateur highwayman whose torso had been scattered about the greenery for several yards.

The second bandit emitted a frenzied yelp, yet he kept a fragment of presence of mind. He leaped to the brake, and clung. His revolver pointed toward the head of Cussemout Crandall.

"Yell whoa! Stop them!" the robber commanded.

"I can't do it, onless I kin take down my hands," retorted the driver caustically.

His glance was fastened upon the sparse hair of the other, in which he had glimpsed a familiar, intriguing quality. Who was it that had a head shaped like an egg, and whose scalp was all dried and chapped where the hair didn't cover?

In time Cussemout probably would have reached the startling answer, but it was rendered unnecessary.

"Drop that gun! Jump down!" came the shouted command.

The bandit shrieked like one possessed. He turned. There, riding hard at his side, gun drawn, was the man who should have been inside the stage all the while, Gila Joe Braden! The last vestige of courage or desperation caused the hold-up artist to swing his gun, to pull the trigger.

At the same moment that the vengeful fingers of Cussemout Crandall closed about the thin windpipe, a six-gun slug tore through the wrist of the bandit. This was purely fortuitous. Gila Joe had shot to kill; had tried only not to wound Cussemout through accident. His bullet missed the breastbone of the robber by five inches.

It was enough. The gun dropped, to be twirled by the flying spokes. Cussemout, exerting a sudden fierce pressure, felt something give beneath his fingers. He knew. Shoving, he threw out the limp figure of the man who had made his try for a fortune in gold.

Cussemout grabbed the reins.

"Y' don't have to bother about him!" he yelled exultantly, sawing this way and that, and looking sidewise straight into the horrified eyes of Claire Lassiter.

It was so. The bandit had fallen with his head queerly doubled under. Gila Joe lifted the mask, not suspecting. Then he straightened. A crackling word of unadulterated surprise left his lips, a word which was supplemented more fully than blasphemy could have done by Cussemout's wordless, gasping astonishment a moment later.

The dead man, grinning up at the late sun of afternoon, was Squirrel Emery.

After a long minute, Gila Joe drew forth his bandanna and wiped his brow.

"Well, I always knew he was queer," he said; then broke off sharply.

"There's another one back thataway," Cussemout reminded. "He got poor Ed; drilled him clean. I reckon Ed evened up the score, though. I'll ride back with you to make sure."

Claire, sickened, did not accompany them; and it was just as well. When Gila Joe and the stage driver returned, the former's visage was grim, puzzled, but uncompromising.

"I don't know the rights of this at all, dear," he said, gently raising Claire from her bowed position and leading her toward the horse. "That other man died instantly. He was my cousin, Wallace Braden."

Chapter XVIII

THE ACCOUNTING

FROM afar off, Foley knew of the coming of the stage. Because the town had mulled over the surprising news brought by the deputy sheriff who had ridden past, and who had been kept from arresting Gila Joe only by Cussemout Crandall's vociferous and sulphuric objections, a crowd had gathered at the Cactus Spine, before which saloon and quondam hotel the incoming passengers usually were discharged. Something like a Roman triumph, on a small scale, was in the making.

Barbey Pete, Foley's practical joker, had come forth with a keg of black powder. Tapping this as though it were a keg of beer, Barbey let a stream of the explosive trickle into the dust of the road in queer curlycues. It wavered in and out. Barbey had been for leaving the half-emptied keg in front of the saloon, but more con-

servative spirits had forced him to move the business end of his display two hundred feet farther along, where it would cave in no more than the wooden fronts of the blacksmith shop and Chinese laundry, at worst. A sulphur match ready to strike, Barbey waited, a wide grin of anticipation on his yellowed tusks.

Another sort of explosion waited, however. Few of the excited and well liquored punchers and townies gathered in that town noted the fact that a black-coated figure rode in at a gallop. The news had reached Stephen Lassiter. Before leaving the ranch, he looked about him, examined his two guns carefully, then pulled forth a long, oval locket from beneath his shirt. Not even Claire had glimpsed this; it was a picture of the wife of his youth, not Claire's mother.

The old man glanced at it. His seamed face crinkled into a curious expression; half-smile, and the rest unfathomable.

"It's the only right way now, Ellen," he muttered. "We all make mistakes. The boy and Claire——"

There he stopped. Thrusting back the locket to its secret resting place above his heart, the place it had graced since the day, long decades since, when a straight standing, black-haired Stephen Lassiter, still ungainly with youth, had led to the altar a smiling girl in the multitudinous skirts of the crinoline period, he turned to the perusal of a far different matter. A rectangular document came unfolded. He handled it gingerly, saw that all was intact. Clipped to the inside was a shorter but fully as comprehensive document. He slipped the two back into their manila envelope, strode out to the porch, and clapped his hands for one of the Mexicans.

"My horse!" he commanded.

A few minutes later the animal appeared. Lassiter interrupted his impatient striding back and forth along the gallery, and came down, his thumbs hitched ominously in the criss-crossed belts from which depended the weighted holsters.

"Today I am going to kill a man, Alfide," he stated, drawing one of the Sprackling and throwing down upon an imaginary opponent.

"*Por Dios!*" ejaculated the startled boy, and guessed, "Eet ees *el Señor* Gila Joe!"

"You named it, suh."

While the gaping Mexican ran back to tell the momentous news to his indolent *companeros*, Stephen Lassiter quirted his mount over the two miles into the town of Foley, New Mexico.

HE ARRIVED none too soon. By the time he had tethered the animal at the hitchrack of the Cactus Spine, the stage, accompanied by two riders, had swung into the last eighth mile, coming at a gallop as was customary. A shout started in the throats of a hundred waiting men. Barbey Pete, guessing wrongly, scratched his match. He had imagined that the snakelike fuse must consume many seconds before it got to the powder. Instead, the dirt of the road seemed to lift into a curling line of smoke. A forgotten barrel of gunpowder, blazed and boomed, leaving only a widening circle of smoke and a hole in the road.

The horses drawing the stage, however, no more than tossed their heads in midgallop. It is doubtful that they heard. The thunder of explosion caused every man assembled to jump, but that was all. Barbey's coup had not been appreciated.

Amid a furore of congratulations which Gila Joe received with puzzled smiles, the incoming stage drew up with a flourish. Its load of dead was taken care of. For some minutes, while Claire and Gila Joe were made to tell separate versions of the story which Cussemout was detailing to all and sundry with gusto, a lone figure in a black coat stood apart.

Finally, Claire's eyes, sweeping the crowd rather helplessly, fastened upon it.

"Daddy!" she cried in the delight of discovery.

Perhaps the skin of the old man's face whitened a shade. At any rate he saw that this was his moment.

"Step aside, child," he bade, pushing her back against the wall of the saloon as she rushed to him.

He stepped clear of the crowd. Gila Joe likewise was free for the moment, as attention focussed elsewhere.

Stephen Lassiter came erect.

"I have come this fah on just one mission, Gila Joe Braden," he cried in a resonant, ringing voice. "Puhhaps you *know* what it is?"

"I—" began Gila Joe, gauging the earnestness behind Lassiter's manner, yet at a loss to account for it. In no way, save in accompanying Claire over this last bit of trail, had he laid himself open to the wrath even of a maniac.

"Wohds do not count now, suh. I have come from the Gila Rivuh to kill yuh. If, aftuh all is said and done, you live and I

die, in my pocket heah—" he tapped the breast of the long-tailed coat—" is all the reason. Now, defend youahself, suh!"

With that he snapped down his hand with what seemed an elaborate, almost suicidal flourish. Out came one of the Spracklins. It belched its staggering roar of powder and ball. Again! Three feet above Joe's head a faded, wooden sign, depicting a crudely painted prickly pear, oscillated creakingly. Two brand new holes had appeared within an inch of each other.

"Damn yuh, fire!" screamed Stephen Lassiter, seemingly beside himself. He waggled the heavy five-shot.

Two full seconds earlier, soon enough so that he could have killed or maimed without the shadow of a doubt, Gila Joe's weapon had leaped forth. For the first time in his career, and possibly the last, it did not spurt lead immediately. Something had come over him. He saw there beyond the horrified, white face of the girl he loved. He saw the man who had cared for him since early adolescence. He was asked to kill, or die.

Was that really it, however? All these thoughts raced through his mind in the veriest fraction of a second. And as somehow truth shines in the blackest gathering of doubt and lie, he knew that he should not kill Stephen Lassiter.

Above his head he heard, subconsciously, the double tick of the slugs passing through the lathing of the painted sign. He wanted sullenly to chuckle. What it was all about still would have to be determined, yet he realized that Stephen Lassiter, dead shot at short range as he always had been and doubtless still was, no more had aimed at him than at one of the nervous stage horses now champing beneath the soothing grasp of the astounded Cussemout Crandall.

Gila Joe smiled. He aimed deliberately, carefully, and pulled the trigger of his right-hand gun. A shriek sped from the lips of Stephen Lassiter. Part of it was pain and shock, but more was rage and futility. He spun about, staggered, and dropped to one knee, as Claire ran up, her eyes fiery with horror and rage against the man she thought she had loved.

But Gila Joe was there also. As the old man strove left-handedly, both to touch his stinging elbow and to pluck forth his other Spracklin, Gila Joe caught his hands. Both the young man's guns were in their sheaths.

"I'm sorry, suh," grimmed Gila Joe. "There's something dead wrong here. I reckon I had to spoil yore coat, but I aimed to let the shirt get by." And he touched Stephen Lassiter's numbed, temporarily paralyzed right elbow, creased by the most careful shot the gunman ever had fired.

Later investigation proved him right. A one-inch rip was gone from the broadcloth coat. Beneath this a brownish singe, grayed on the edges from hot lead, showed on the silk shirt. The skin beneath was bruised but unbroken.

Stephen Lassiter slowly straightened. His shoulders came up from the droop of despair.

"Youah dead right, boy. Don't blame him, folks; it's my fault, not his. And now, Claire, honey, d'you suppose the stage driveh would take you, 'n' me, 'n' Joe, heah, out to the ranch? Ask old Cussemout, will yuh, honey? Tell him to come along. Ah'm kind of done in, Ah reckon."

He was. Except for the support of Gila Joe, he would have fallen. The latter, not understanding, yet certain that this was to be a complete showdown in more ways than one, stooped, lifted the brittle oldster as he might have lifted a child, and set him on the seat beside Cussemout Crandall.

"Can yuh take care of him for that long a ride?" he queried.

"Kin I!" barked Cussemout Crandall. "Y'u young folks git inside. Oh, y'u want to ride? Well, let's go!" And he cracked his whip.

The surprised team trotted away toward the 5-0, leaving a wondering crowd milling back and forth through the open doorway of the Cactus Spine. And if Claire Lassiter's face was rigid with remembered terror, something else now had mingled with that emotion. Mechanically she allowed Gila Joe to boost her to the saddle. Then she rode, staring straight ahead. After half a mile, feeling the touch of his boot against her own as the two horses joggled one against the other, she turned, to find him regarding her with an inscrutable expression that was more than half-smile. Certainly it was not the glance of a man with any tinge of guilt upon his soul.

Color mounted to her neck, to her cheeks. She looked forward to the coach, where old Cussemout, the forgotten gold chests back of his spurless heels, embraced with his right arm the slouched figure of her father. She wondered; and yet in the vast puzzle there was a feeling of great relief.

AH CAME to pay my debt to yuh," stated Stephen Lassiter. "Ah expected yuh to shoot me down, since yuh knew that Ah had no love for yuh on the occasion of our last unfortunate meeting. Ah fired to miss. Why did yuh wait?"

They were in the comfortable living-room of the 5-o ranch-house. Gila Joe lounged in the bay window seat, the speechless Cussemout beside him. Stephen Lassiter, with one arm about Claire, stood before them.

Gila Joe grinned.

"I dunno—something I saw in yore eyes, I reckon," he answered sheepishly. "Anyway, I didn't have anything—any reason to want yuh dead."

"Yuh did, suh!" contradicted Lassiter sharply. "Many reasons. Heah is one."

He reached within the black lapel, temporarily disengaging himself from his daughter, withdrew something from a Manila envelope, and tore away the first sheet of the document.

"Read it," he bade. "You, too, Claire."

Wonderingly the two, heads close, scanned the pithy, pitiable lines of confession. These stated simply that Stephen Lassiter, out of an insane jealousy, had placed the spur ratchet belonging to Joe Braden on the scene of Joachim Braden's murder, where that was the only real evidence to convict.

"Much beyond that has come to my knowledge, suh," continued the oldster, after a breathless pause of five seconds. "Youah lovely cousin, Wallace Braden, drank too much liquor heah one night. I found out who killed Joachim Braden, and why; it was his own son. Joachim always was damn bad. He wanted Wallace to go out with him, rustling. Wallace wanted to stay—yellow, prob'ly; it wasn't honesty. Maybe he knew a good thing when he had it. Anyway, he shot down Joachim from a bush. That's the kind of snake we've had in the house."

"He's dead now, father," interrupted Claire quietly. Her voice trembled, but it was with gladness.

When Cussemout Crandall took it upon himself to answer in gorgeous detail the questions of Lassiter concerning the hold-up, she moved restlessly. Without seeming to intend any such movement she reached the side of Gila Joe. She touched him. His arm went about her, lightly, yet with an assurance of possession which made her tingle to the soles of her feet.

There was more, much more of talk and explanation. Yet Claire no longer seemed to wish to desert this particular part of the room.

After some pertinent words from Gila Joe, concerning his own hope for a brand, a wife and a real home, Stephen Lassiter finally smiled a little tiredly, a little pathetically.

"Yuh young folks ah right," he nodded slowly. "Yuh'll be good to her, Joe. I know it. This heah's a bettah ranch than the old Gila Bend. S'pose yuh stay heah?"

"Oh, nothing would suit me better, daddy," burst out Claire happily.

"But—" began Gila Joe.

"But nothing, young man!" snapped Stephen Lassieter, with a momentary return of his old fire. "Yuh say yuh have some money. All right, buy in. Ah'll sell a good share, half anyway, for what yuh can put in now. Suits?"

"Suits me," agreed Gila Joe with a smile.

"Then theah's just one otheh thing," said Stephen Lassiter, turning upon Cussemout. "Youah in on this, old friend. Ah'm going to buy youah stage, hosses, and all. Youah coming with me on a long trip back to the Gila Bend country. Don't ahgue, suh. I've got to go back theah, tell a sheriff what a dang fool Ah made of myself, tell him who really killed Joachim Braden; and then tell him to auction off one pretty good ranch—not as good as this one, though. Maybe by that time these young folks will be ready to fohgive an old fossil."

He took the arm of the stage driver.

At that second Claire sprang up, embracing him.

"Daddy!" she cried, kissing him.

He looked far past her, with moist eyes that saw all the ghosts of loves of other decades.

"Yes, honey," he answered gently. "Youah kisses belong now to anotheh, betteh man. Save them, honey." And, pushing her from him gently but firmly, he stalked out of the room, arm in arm with Cussemout Crandall.

The TEXAS RANGERS

By THOMAS D. BARTON
Adjutant-General of Texas and Commander of the Texas Rangers
and
WALTER PRESCOTT WEBB
Department of History, University of Texas

WITH the formation of the federal constitution each state retained its police power, but it left the exercise of it to local peace officers. With the passing away of the frontier, roughly marked by the date 1885, conditions changed and many states found it desirable to create a special police. With the coming of good roads and rapid transportation, crime had ceased to be local and become cosmopolitan. Therefore a constabulary was needed with an authority that would also be cosmopolitan, that would not stop with the city limits or the county line.

In response to this need several of our commonwealths have created a constabulary with authority that is state wide. All of these forces have come into existence since 1900 and in response to modern needs and post-frontier conditions.

We have on the continent, however, two other organizations whose origin goes back to the necessities of the frontier: these are the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, formerly the Royal Northwest Mounted, and the Texas Rangers. Both were called into being by frontier conditions and rendered their greatest service under those conditions. Both have attained a reputation and a prestige that is, or once was, world-wide. All honor and praise is due to the Royal Canadian Mounted, and they have received much of both. But the Texas force will not suffer in comparison. The Royal force was created in 1873, but at that time the Texas Ranger organization had been doing service for nearly forty years. It is the oldest force of the kind on the American continent. It came into existence in time of revolution, when a detached handful of Anglo-Americans — the Texans — were fighting to free themselves from a tyrannical government; it was born to Texas in the throes of revolution, and went grimly about the task of defending a young nation whose inhabitants were few and whose treasury was empty. With these Texans there was no pomp and no ceremony, no flag and no uniform, little food and often no pay. Yet they held the line during the existence of the Republic of Texas—1836-1845—against two of the most merciless and relentless foes known to mankind. Whereas His Majesty's force had to contend with the foe within—the Indian or the Esquimo—the Texas Ranger had to contend with the Indian within and the Mexican without. The Canadian dealt with subjects and wards; the Texans with an internal enemy and a foreign foe.

The tactics and strategy of the Texas Rangers were, and today are, as informal as their dress, determined in large measure by their foes. Both the Comanche Indian and the Mexican were expert horsemen, and they made all their forays and attacks on horseback. The Ranger, therefore, had to become a horseman and had to adopt weapons suited to mounted combat. Thus he came in time to show great preference for the six-shooter which became his own sweet weapon. It was faster than the Indian arrow and could be managed with effect from the hurricane deck of a Texas mustang. Horsemanship and marksmanship were the unmistakable traits of the Texas Rangers.

When Texas joined the Union in 1845, war followed with Mexico. The Texas

Rangers went into this war with glee, serving as scouts and spies in the armies of Taylor and Scott—the eyes and ears of the army. Their reputation at the end of that war was perhaps at its zenith. Some idea of it may be obtained by the following sketch by Giddings:

> Of this far-famed corps, so much feared and hated by the Mexicans, I can add nothing to what has already been written. The character of the Texas Ranger is now well known by both friend and foe. As a mounted soldier he has no counterpart in any age or country. Neither Cavalier nor Cossack, Mameluke nor Moss-trooper are like him; and yet, in some respects he resembles them all. Chivalrous, bold, and impetuous in action, he is yet wary and calculating, always impatient of restraint, and sometimes unscrupulous and unmerciful. He is un-uniformed and undrilled, and performs his active duties thoroughly, but with little regard to order or system.

That description, written three-quarters of a century ago, is not inapplicable today.

Under the present organization, the Texas Ranger force consists of six companies, each officered by a captain and a sergeant, all under the command of the adjutant-general. In reality the Texas Rangers are under the control of the governor of the state. Each captain enlists his own men with such qualifications as he may desire to impose. There are no examinations and no specified qualifications, other than that a Ranger must be a citizen of Texas.

Though without legal provision, there are two branches to the service, border and interior. Two companies are located on the Mexican border in camps set down along the Rio Grande. Though few in number they are a power for the enforcement of law. Their chief activity lies in protecting the ranchmen from the border cattle-thieves and suppressing the bandit gangs that congregate in the wild country just across the river. They patrol the river on horseback, carrying their supplies by pack mules, armed with Colt, rifle and knife. They are absolutely fearless and terribly dangerous to evil-doers. The ranchmen and citizens who live on the Mexican border say in all earnestness that one Texas Ranger is worth more in the way of protection than a thousand soldiers. They have had experience with both and they think they know.

Four companies operate in the interior of the state. The Headquarters Company remains at Austin and serves as an emergency or reserve company for activity anywhere. The duties of the interior men vary widely. In general it may be said that they are called in to handle any situation that gets beyond the control of the local authorities. The opening up of the big oil fields in Texas has been attended with tremendous social consequences. Villages of a thousand inhabitants become boom towns of thirty thousand people almost overnight. Law breaks down, and the local officials are swept away with the magnitude of their problem. Then the Texas Rangers are called in to drive out the gambler, hijacker, prostitute, and bootlegger and restore order to the distracted place. There is not an oil town in the state that has not at some time required the services of the Texas Rangers.

Again it has happened, and more than once, that a mob gathers howling about a county jail demanding blood vengeance for some heinous crime perpetrated by the prisoner in the cell. The mob cannot be turned. Suddenly through the night there comes the throb, throb of a flying automobile which drives up to the jail. One man, or two, or three, may climb from the car. They are grim and silent fellows, often giants in stature, dressed in the garb of the ranger—with heavy boots and big Stetson hats. Once there they are not hurried. Ah, how ominously deliberate and calm are these Rangers. They walk to the head of the mob, and place themselves between it and the jail. One may carry a machine-gun which he can operate from the shoulder. But they are in no hurry. The consultation is short, for they are poor talkers. The Ranger in charge addresses the mob leaders in this fashion:

"Men, we are Texas Rangers. We have come to protect this prisoner. We do not want trouble but we are ready for it. We order you now to go to your homes and to clear this street and we give you one minute to obey. We are not here to argue. Now go."

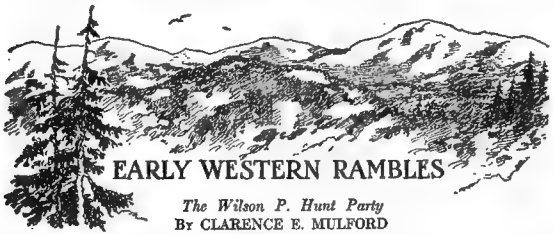
The mob hesitates, wavers, murmurs.

"Come!" says the captain.

Three men move forward, weapons in hand. It is the crucial moment, but it passes, and as the three move on three hundred move back, back, back, not one of whom is willing to look with intent into the serene eye of those big, silent men. The mutter and murmur of voices dies in the street and the little town on the Texas

prairie settles down to sleep for the night with perfect assurance that "nothing exciting will happen."

It is thus that they perpetuate the tradition of the force and remind each other that in the ninety years of history no Texas Ranger ever lost a man. And it may be said in all truth that that tradition, the very name of Texas Ranger, was more effectual in the dispersion of the mob than the power of three men with weapons in their hands.



EARLY WESTERN RAMBLES

The Wilson P. Hunt Party

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

IN JULY, 1811, Wilson P. Hunt, Ramsay Crooks and Donald McKenzie led a large party overland from the Missouri River at the Arikara Villages—(just above the mouth of Grand River, and near the boundary line between North and South Dakota. Striking westward and a little south they crossed the Grand River, and followed along the divide between it and Moreau River, came to and followed the upper waters of the Little Missouri, passing north and west of the Black Hills, crossed the divide between the Belle Fourche and Powder Rivers, went over the Big Horn Mountains under guidance of a party of Crow Indians, following an old Indian trial.

They reached the Big Horn River where it is formed by the junction of the Popo Agie and Wind River. Going up the latter to its forks, they followed a tributary which came in from the southwest, and they crossed the Continental Divide and saw the distant peaks of the Three Tetons. Continuing southwest they at last reached a branch of Green River, the upper fork of the Colorado, which pours into the Gulf of California. Going down it a few miles they followed up one of its western tributaries, perhaps Twin or Rock Creeks, and crossed the Gros Ventre Mountains to the upper waters of Hoback River.

They were now on one of the streams of the great Columbia system, and they hailed it with delight. The identity of this little river is reached by the fact that they learned that just below them were the canyons of Snake River. Crossing the Snake, they went over the Teton Mountains, presumably over Teton Pass, went through the valley which later was to be known as Pierre's Hole, and came to Ft. Henry, abandoned then, on Henry's Fork of Snake River. Here a great mistake was made in deciding to abandon horses for boats and to try to go the rest of the way by water. In high spirits on October 19th the party set out in fifteen canoes.

Nine days of anxious navigation brought them to the first graphic evidence of their folly: in a rapids which they named Cauldron Linn, and also the Devil's Scuttle Hole, a canoe was wrecked and a voyageur drowned. At this point a man named Reed was sent ahead to investigate, and from there on canoes and their contents were lost rapidly. The rest of the goods were cached and the party split up. Crooks led one to go back to Ft. Henry. McKenzie led another to cross the desert; McLellan, another party to go downstream. Crooks returned and led half the remaining party along one side of the river, while Hunt led the rest down the other side.

McKenzie, Reed and McLellan, with their parties, met farther down and managed to get through the mountains, reaching Astoria, on the Columbia, on January 18, 1812. Hunt and Crooks both were stopped by the mountains and forced to turn back, Crooks deciding to winter with friendly Indians, and Hunt determined to go on. The latter recuperated, got a small stock of supplies, crossed the Blue Mountains with his party and reached Astoria, February 15, 1812. Crooks waited, and set out again with his small party, reaching Astoria, May 11, 1812. The total distance traveled amounted to about 2,100 miles.

THE WINNING OF CINCINNATI MCQUEEN

By JAMES B. HENDRYX
Author of "Dixie"

Days of the open range in all its glory were those days when the McQueen ranch flourished on Tin Cup; when Charlie Winter and Billy Kirkpatrick staked their all on a cow-pony race across the dusty flats of White Horse

SLOWLY we worked the drag of the herd over the rim of the coulee. Old cows and young calves, gaunt and dull eyed, whose wobbly legs seemed scarcely able to support their weight, staggered weakly over the parched buffalo grass in the wake of the herd. Gradually the weaklings dropped to the rear and it became harder and harder to keep them moving into the glare of the westering sun.

Sounds had long ceased to issue from our parched throats. Even the raucous *y-e-o-w, y-e-o-w!* of the leather-lunged Milk River Joe had given place to an occasional half-hearted *yip* as he swung the knotted end of his lariat against the ribs of a straggler.

All day we had forced the half-starved cattle over the burned-up range and across miles of flaring alkali flats where the gray dust, kicked up by hundreds of clicking hoofs, rose in choking clouds, hung in the still, hot air and settled in thick layers over men, horses, and cattle so that the slowly moving herd, viewed through the shimmering heat waves, suggested a grotesquely animated drab monochrome.

All day the sun had beaten down on thirsty cattle, the slobber drooling from their low-hung muzzles in long, slimy strings; on sweating horses and cursing men. When at last we arrived at the rim of Tin Cup, it hung low in the west where the Highwoods loom blue and indistinct across the red and black stretches of the mica-studded Bad Lands. Huge, metallic, coppery, it glared through the haze of the rising dust cloud, loath even now to relinquish its blistering torture.

Mercilessly we plied our rope ends to the weary flanks of laggards that merely humped their backs, or winced from the sting with comical sidewise twists of their bodies. The green clumps of stunted cottonwoods and willows that marked the course of Tin Cup, its stream reduced by the drought and the irrigating ditches above to a disconnected series of stagnant water-holes, looked cool and refreshing to our blood-shot eyes. We had found no water since morning and our swollen tongues rasped against teeth tight clenched behind cracked lips.

The last of the stragglers staggered over the rim and, catching a whiff of water in the air, plunged recklessly down the steep side after the roaring, bucking, kicking herd already belly deep in the stinking, amber colored water of the alkali holes.

They greedily sucked great gulps of the slimy liquid.

We pulled up and watched the frantic beasts pushing and shoving as they crowded into the mud-churned pools. The sun was disappearing behind Square Butte, the southmost reach of the Highwoods. To the south, across the Missouri, the Judith Mountains reared their black heads, and to the north the Bear Paws cast long shadows across the range.

Our interest, however, was not in the landscape, but centered upon the rotting buildings of the old McQueen ranch where the diverging walls of the coulee formed a half-mile-wide valley. There we knew was a spring of real water, and there we would find Scotty and the wagons. I made out the white square of the little cook tent against the brown grass. Milk River Joe's eye caught it, and with a sickly, unintelligible attempt at the old *"Whoop-e-e,* come an' git it or I'll throw it away!" the grub call of the roundup, he put the rowels to his horse and plunged into the coulee, with Tex, Old Dave, and me tied for second.

An hour later we lay stretched on our blankets close around the smudge. A delicious coolness was in the air and overhead the stars winked cheerily. We had drunk gallons of cold, clear spring water and with other gallons had removed from our hands and faces such portion of the caked alkali dust as was readily detachable. Also we had eaten—rather, gorged to surfeiting, on thick juicy steak and boiled potatoes and pie—canned apple pie—two inches thick and swimming in juice, with a crust that had substance to it—real crust, thick as linoleum; the kind you have to chew before you can swallow. And coffee, thick and black and hot as molten iron! Of course the stars winked cheerily.

Millions of mosquitoes swarmed about us, filling the air with a low, singing hum, and far away among the rim-rocks a coyote howled. Close about us the steady *snip, snip,* the soft rattle of hobble chains and the switching of tails told where the horses were feeding.

The old cowman produced three dilapidated cigars from his pocket and examined them critically. One after another he endeavored to light them. In vain he licked the wrappers, straightened their broken backs, and punched them into shape. He held a glowing brand to the ends and puffed until he was red in the face; then, one by one, he threw them regretfully into the fire. We smoked cigarettes and said nothing, but winked one to the other. Old Dave fidgeted uneasily as the fragrant smoke drifted across his face. Finally he could stand it no longer.

"Let's see your tobacco and papers, Jim. My seegars is all busted." He spoke sheepishly, as well he might, for he was prone to refer disparagingly to the little life-savers.

I produced the makings and with a sigh of content the Old Man proceeded to roll one.

"Theah's a heap of cigarettes you neveh rolled, ain't theh, Dave? Wouldn't yeh like a piece of twine?" drawled Tex.

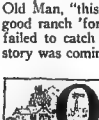
"You put me in mind of a cub bear jugglin' a peanut," remarked Milk River, facetiously. "You're sure about that handy."

"Look heah, Dave, when yeh staht out to braid a dream yeh want to work it like this." Reaching for the tobacco and papers, Tex deftly rolled a little cylinder with one hand. "Little practice is all yeh need. Meantime, yeh betteh smoke this one." The Old Man accepted the cigarette with a grin.

"There's tricks in all trades," he said; "mine's the cow business."

"Yes, seh," replied Tex, in his slow musical drawl. "But when a man gets right tricky in the cow business seems like he most gen'ally always settles down in Deah Lodge fo' a spell."

"Speakin' of Deer Lodge," remarked the Old Man, "this here used to be a crackin' good ranch 'fore Tin Cup run dry." We failed to catch the relevance, but knew a story was coming.



LD TOM McQUEEN made him a purty good stake right here in this coulee. Let's see, it's eight year since he pulled his freight. Water kep' a-gettin' scurser an' scurser every year. I can remember back in the 'eighties when this here crick run a stream big as People's Crick. But that was 'fore the railroad come through." According to Dave Crosby, old-timer, the railroad is responsible for all the ills to which long suffering humanity is heir.

"This place didn't look nothin' like it does now. It was one of the top ranches them days, up till the water gave out. The old freight trail used to cross here an' over it went all the freight 'tween Benton and Cow Island crossin'; an' the stage, too, as' McQueen's was a change station. Lordee,

the dances they used to have here! Tom had six darters an' they was tol'ble good lookin', barrin' a squint here, an' a mouth or two of twisted teeth there, an' a couple of red heads or so. But they averaged up as good as the general run.

"That was 'fore the Circle C sold out to the Two Bar, an' the boys kep' the trail purty well het up 'tween Fourchette an' McQueen's. Then there was all the TU an' IX riders besides. If McNamara had all the strayed horses that was hunted for along this crick while them girls was marryin' off, you couldn't 've seen the range fer Flyin' A's.

"It sure is a lonesome lookin' layout now, but take it first an' last, there's been more courtin' done up an' down this here coulee than in any coulee in Choteau County, I reckon. You couldn't come 'long here no time of day—nor night neither, hardly—but what there'd be from one to a dozen cayuses dozin' 'round. The top rail of that there old horse corral used to be polished slicker'n a pianner lid, where the boys set along it.

"Them girls never was none lonesome—an' Lord, the junk they used to get brought! Saddles an' bridles an' petrified fish an' Injun skulls an' six-shooters, not to say nothin' about what you might call perishable stuff—candy an' wild-flowers an' coyote pups. Tom built a pen special fer coyote pups, but they was always gettin' out. I suspicioned that he lifted 'em over the top an' drawed down the bounty."

"Wheh'd this heah McQueen outfit round up at when they left Tin Cup?" asked Tex.

"I do'know. Tom's wife died an' he sold out to the Bear Paw Pool an' left the country. I don't blame him none, what with his wife dyin' on him, an' the crick dryin' up, an' the marryin' his girls done—an' consid'ble they'd ought to done, but didn't. Seems like they never had no luck pickin' out husban's. The only one that done even middlin' well was the squint-eyed one. She married up with a Swede sheep man over on the Marias.

"Tom told me jest 'fore he pulled out the devil owed him a debt an' was payin' him off in son-in-laws.

"It's too bad they couldn't 've got better men—the two oldest ones anyhow; they sure was fine lookin' girls. 'Twas them two helt up the average of the bunch. Big dark eyes an' hair as black as a crow's wing—personal, I've got a leanin' toward blue eyes, an' yaller hair; but there's plenty favors the black. Cincinnati an' Ashtabula their names was. Then come Ravenna, an' Fostoria, an' Marietta; I can't rec'lect the squinty one's name, but it was some town or other.

"Tom's wife come from back East, somewheres—New York, or Pennsylvania, or mebbe Ohio, I fer'get which; an' she jest nach'ly got so plumb homesick that she named the babies as fast as they came fer the towns back where she used to live. It riled Tom consid'ble, first off, but he come 'round to it. The babies kep' a-comin' an' after Marietta, Tom he used to say how his wife would be in the devil of a fix if she'd 've come from some little state like Rhode Island. It was a liberal edjication in georgafy fer a man jest to hang 'round an' here them girls called to supper.

"Charlie Winter was ridin' fer the Circle C them days, him an' Jack Conally, an' Teton, an' Billy Kirkpatrick, an' a whole bunch more an', as I said, they was plenty travel 'tween Fourchette an' Tin Cup. Charlie an' Billy was always together; wasn't never no more'n a whoop an' a holler apart. Folks used to call 'em the Simoneze Twins. An', like they done everything else, they done their courtin'—together. Leastwise, they started out that way, an' if they'd b'en sensible things might 've turned out different all around. 'Stead of each one courtin' separate girls, nothin' must do but they both had to have Cincinnati.

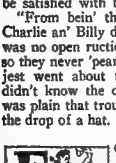
"They wasn't no heft of difference 'tween them two, Cincinnati an' Ashtabula, fer as I could see. Either one would 've been good enough fer Charlie, an' t'other fer Billy, or vicy vercy around. It run 'long that-a-way a consid'ble spell with Cincinnati favorin' both about equal. 'Peared like she wasn't in no hurry to get married nohow, an' she kep' baitin' 'em on.

"'Twasn't long 'fore everyone but them two was out of the runnin' an' they was consid'ble speculation about which would get her. Personal, I favored Charlie fer a couple of hundred again' Andy Moore's pick of Billy. First an' last they was a lot of money bet, an' the odds was about even. 'Long 'bout this time Tom tuck a hand in the game. Not that he give a doggone one way or t'other which one got Cincinnati, 'cause he figgered the one that didn't would take Ashtabula, an' bein' as they was both goin' to be son-in-laws to him it didn't make no difference which branch of the family they was related through.

"However much bein' in love throwed Charlie an' Billy offen their feed, it didn't

affect their cayuses none similar. An' bein' as one, or t'other, or both, was hangin' 'round most of the time, the two ends of Tom's corral haystack was drawin' mighty clost together. So one day he come right out an' spoke his mind. He told Cincinnati she'd got to quit foolin' an' make up her mind which one she'd marry, an' she know'd there wasn't no use augerin' with the old man once he'd got his mind set. So she said she'd make her choist an' tell 'em the day the round-up was finished. It was the spring round-up an' that give her till 'long in July, an' the boys an' Tom had to be satisfied with that.

"From bein' the clostest kind of pals, Charlie an' Billy drifted apart. They never was no open ruction 'tween 'em, but it got so they never 'peared to notice one another, jest went about their business like they didn't know the other was 'round, but it was plain that trouble'd start 'tween 'em at the drop of a hat.



FOURTH OF JULY the round-up was 'bout over an' Bob Dye pulled the wagons in on Three Mile so the boys could take in the celebration at White Horse. They all rode in 'long in the mornin'. Some of the IX boys was there, an' the TU, an' Bear Paw Pool wagons was camped on the flats, so things was consid'ble lively. They was the usual program: buckin' contests, trick ridin', an' horse racin'.

"Everythin' run off smooth up to the horse race. It got 'round that both Charlie an' Billy was goin' to enter, an' everyone else dropped out. Charlie had a big, rangy black that sure could run, an' Billy'd got holt of a close-built little sorrel that never had been beat. They was plenty of money in sight on both sides an' takers fer all of it. The queer part was, neither Charlie nor Billy had bet a cent, an' they both had money, too. B'en savin' it up fer a year to get married on. Outside them two, I don't reckon they was a man in the crowd that didn't have money up one way or t'other.

"Jest 'fore the race Charlie rode up on his black an' the crowd yelled till you'd 've thought everyone was bettin' on his horse. Then 'long come Billy an' they yelled just as hard fer him. They was to run a half a mile acrost the flats to where a post had been set, an' back to the startin' place. It sure was still when they come up fer the start, each one lookin' like he didn't know the other was there. Jest as they was about to start Charlie leaned over in his saddle.

"'If you think that damn red mule of yourn can run,' he says, 'I'll bet my whole pile again' yourn that the black'll beat him.'

"'You're on,' says Billy, glarin' back at him. 'If this here race-horse don't beat that there black girraft, I'll eat him, shoes an' all.'

"Then the crowd went wild. More bets was made. 'Bout all the money was up already but everyone that could borry a dollar was bettin' that, an' them that couldn't was bettin' horses, saddles, bridles, spurs, an' even chaps an' hats. It sure was plain that half that crowd was shortly goin' to be more broke then they ever was before. You see, everyone know'd 'bout them two courtin' Cincinnati McQueen, an' they savvied that she'd have to take the winner. Cincinnati know'd it, too.

"Old Tom had drove with his fambly from Tin Cup to take in the celebration an' the girls was scattered 'round in the crowd, each one with a trailin' of cow-hands follerin' her—all but Cincinnati. She stood off to one side where some cottonwoods had been stuck in the ground to furnish shade fer a soft drink stand. An' when I seen the look in her eyes as Charlie rode up to the startin' place, I hunted up Andy Moore an' tried to double my bet.

"Charlie's big black got away 'bout four jumps in the lead an' then the dust got so thick you couldn't tell how they was runnin'. They wasn't no hollerin' then. Every man had his eyes on that dust cloud out on the flats. Their jaws was clamped shut an' their faces looked draw'd an' hard. Someone lit a match an' them near him jumped.

"I looked at Cincinnati. The front of her dress was clinched in her right hand, her lips was pressed tight, an' her eyes was starin' straight out across the flats tryin' to bore through the dust cloud.

"Well, Billy's sorrel won—won by a neck. He was shorter-geared than the black, but quick as a cat. It was the turn beat Charlie Winter; straight away, the black would've won.

"I looked for Cincinnati a minute after Billy Kirkpatrick's sorrel crossed the finish line. But she was gone. Onct again that day I seen her; it was a couple of hours later when she borryed my horse an' I watched her ride out acrost the flats alone, headin' fer Tin Cup.

The Circle C boys had mostly put their money on the black, so after the race they hit the trail fer the wagons. Billy hunted

fer Cincinnati, an' when he couldn't find her he fooled 'round havin' a little blow-out with some of them that had won. After the dance he headed fer the wagons.

"Charlie borryed a hundred offen Bob Dye an' set in a game over to the Eldorado. That wasn't Charlie's lucky day. He played 'long till he lost his stake, an' toward mornin' he pulled out, too.

"Billy didn't show up fer breakfast. His bed wasn't unrolled an' the boys figgered he'd stayed in town. But when the nighthawk run in the remuda there was Billy's horse with the saddle an' bridle on. He'd slipped in durin' the night.

THEY found Billy layin' in the gravel where the trail crosses Milk River. They was a neat smallish hole 'tween his shoulder blades an' an ugly big one in front where a forty-five ball had ripped h'm through. They brung him into White Horse an' Henry Miwald, the sheriff, rode out to Three Mile where the wagons was. He went over to where Charlie was settin' on a bed-roll.

"'Did you see Billy Kirkpatrick on the trail last night?' he asks.

"'No,' says Charlie, kind of grouchy like.

"'You left White Horse a short time after he did.'

"'I don't know nothin' 'bout him an' I don't give a damn. I come straight to camp an' never seen no one.'

"Miwald tuck Charlie's gun an' throwed it open. There was two empty shells an' four loads. Charlie claimed he'd shot at a coyote, but, things bein' as they was, Miwald tuck him to Benton.

"The evidence was all again' Charlie, an' they convicted him. The jedge sentenced him to be hung, but later the gov'nor changed his sentence to life. He's in Deer Lodge now."

A silence fell upon us into which the sounds of the night fitted dreamily.

"What become of the girl?" asked Milk River Joe.

"Cincinnati? Oh, she's married up with Teton; you boys know Teton, that breed that rides fer the IX. He was a flashy cuss them days, young an' good lookin', an' could ride the bad ones straight up with the best of 'em. Always rigged out in a fancy outfit with shiny silver conchos wherever they was room to stick 'em. Mostly he was a gambler; only rode when he was broke. They was plenty claimed he was crooked, but if he was they wasn't no one slick enough to catch him at it, an' he got by. They lived together a few years an' then she quit him. Since then she's sort of drifted from bad to worse. It's her that's known now as Claire Sinclaire.

"You boys have seen her dealin' faro in Roulette Jake's place. Some calls her 'The Lady of the Rings' on account of them big dimon's that flitters all over her fingers. Somehow them stones always remind me of ice—hard an' cold they look in spite of the fire they flash. Hard an' cold like the eyes of Claire Sinclaire as she watches the run of the cards. Eyes that look as if they wasn't no heart behind 'em; that don't see nothin' but jest the cards an' the chips scattered around over the layout, an' the stacks of yellow gold.

"I can remember when those eyes wasn't like that; when they was soft an' flashin' an' human, an' when they wasn't no hard lines in her face, an' when the red of her lips was real. It's the gamblin' that's done it. The cards an' the gold has set their stamp on her. It's a kind o' pity, in a way, too. I can't help thinkin' if Charlie or Billy'd 've got her, 'stead of that damn' breed, things would 've turned out different."

The Old Man paused and for some moments gazed at the sagging buildings of the abandoned ranch that showed in blurred outline beneath the winking stars. Half-screened by the smoke of the mosquito smudge, Tex nudged me softly, and put his lips close to my ear.

"He ain't here," he whispered. "Them buildin's ain't old; they're new an' all lit up. An' there's cayuses dozin' around with their kaks on. An' there's a row of cowboys on the horse corral. An' that sound ain't wind in the cottonwood; it's fiddlin', an' the janglin' of spurs, an' the scrapin' of feet on the floor. He's seein' the old days back—but mostly its the girl with the eyes——"

He broke off abruptly as the Old Man stirred the fire with his foot.

"Seems like yo' got a powerful good recollection of them eyes an' lips, Dave," Tex said aloud. "Mebbe this heah Charlie Winter an' Billy Kirkpatrick an' Teton wasn't the only candidates in the runnin' way back yondeh."

"You talk like a fool," retorted the Old Man, gruffly. "It's time we was rollin' in. We got to throw that Black Coulee bunch on water tomorrow."

THREE weeks later Tex and I rode up to the IX home ranch whither we had been sent to deliver some horses. It was just before the round-up and we picked our way through the clutter of saddles and rolls of bedding which bestrewed the ground and joined a group near the bunkhouse.

"What's goin' on oveh to the corral?" asked Tex, as we divested ourselves of heavy chaps and belts.

"Poker," laconically answered Slim Henderson. "Game's been runnin' off an' on fer a week. Everyone's broke but them four. The spring wages of the whole outfit is in that game."

"Who's playin'?" inquired Tex, with an elaborate show of indifference.

"Roy Inman, an' Sam, an' a Two Bar rep, an' Teton."

"Who's winnin'?"

"They're all ahead of the game. Everyone else is cleared out. Teton, mostly, I guess."

"They tell me theh's a whole lot of honest dealin' this heah Teton neveh done. Leastwise, I've heahd he's mighty lucky on his own deal," ventured Tex.

Slim replied with a noncommittal shrug.

Tex turned to me. "Jim, I reckon we might as well loaf oveh an' hand this heah Teton pehson, ouh meagh savin's now as lateh, then we can ride with a clean conscience along side of these heah otheh mo'nful onfo'tunates."

We went over where the game was in progress on a blanket spread in the shade of the horse corral. As Slim said, there was a good deal of money in the game and the bulk of it was in front of Teton. We looked on for a while, getting a line on the play; then, with a nod all around, we sat in.

There was something about the breed, Teton, that I did not like. His features were rather well formed and he might have been called handsome but for the fact that his black eyes were too bright, and there was a peculiar droop to the corners of his mouth which gave the appearance of a perpetual sneer. His Indian blood showed only in his black hair and the dark tint of his skin. The game proceeded and at the end of an hour Tex had contributed his pile and dropped out.

Then it happened! Teton's hold-out slipped! For just a second our eyes met and he knew his game was up. Quick as a flash his hand flew to his shirt front and the next instant I caught the glint of a knife blade as he lunged a vicious downward stroke. I dodged, but the knife entered the back of my hand, pinning it to the blanket. Meanwhile I was frantically reaching for the gun that wasn't there; we had removed our belts on account of the heat.

After a jerk or two he abandoned the knife and, leaping to his feet, rushed to the corner of the stable where a cow-pony stood saddled and bridled. Vaulting into the saddle, he disappeared among the cottonwoods down the creek. By the time the boys saddled up Teton had got a big lead and, knowing the country the way he did, he made a clean get-away.

IT WAS along in October, one of those fall days that start the boys wondering what they did with their summer's wages. The wind whistled out of the northeast, alternating flurries of stinging snow with showers of sleet that froze as it fell. We'd gathered a trainload of beef and, hands being scarce, there was only Old Dave, and Milky River Joe, Tex, and me to load them. And she was some peach of a job! Shipping corrals knee-deep to a giraffe in mud and muck, the cayuses sulky, the steers all on the prod, and the running boards along the shoots slick with ice.

Along toward the middle of the forenoon the limited stopped at the station long enough for us to view through the windows some several hundred of the citizenry of the republic warmly and comfortably ensconced upon the plush cushions. As it pulled out Milky River Joe delivered himself of an empassioned oration which set forth, in general and in particular, the undesirability of cowpunching as a vocation. Listening, Tex and I grinned approval, and the Old Man, being of Presbyterian habit, pretended not to hear. Glancing about for fresh inspiration, Milk River pointed a wet glove toward the station platform where a solitary figure stood limned against the gray expanse of sage-brush.

"What-en-hell would anyone git off'n a train at a cow town fer on a day like this?" he demanded, querulously. "Don't he know we're short-handed, an' he's liable to git a job? Look at him, standin' there gawpin' around like there was somethin' worth lookin' at at this God-fersaken mud-

hole that calls itself a town! He's a pilgrim, at that—he ain't got no war-bag; an' he ain't a drummer, 'cause he ain't even got a valise, an' he don't look like a tramp that got kicked off the blind. Look at him—jest steps right off the train like he'd got to where he was goin' an' don't know what to do when he's got there!"

"Yo' sho' missed yo' callin', Milk River," drawled Tex. "If some bishop had got holt of you 'fore your youth he might 've made a kind of a stop-gap preacher out of yo', or if Mr. Pinkerton could 'ave added yo' to his force without subtractin' a good man——"

"He's headin' this way!" exclaimed Milk River, ignoring Tex. "Why-en-hell don't he stick to the sidewalk an' go up-town? Them store pants'll be mud to the knees 'fore he gits here. If it wasn't fer these damn' dogies I'd have my belly up agin' Ross's bar right now."

"He ain't no pilgrim," opined Tex, eyeing the stranger, who was picking his way across the mud-churned flats. "Look at them laigs. He's kind of oldish, but he's be'n a cow waddy sometime or 'nother."

"Hists up his leg like he had the string halt," grinned Milk River.

I had seen that hitch before; it was the lock-step.

Old Dave roared at us to switch in another pen. Milk River dropped from the fence into his saddle, and Tex and I took our places as the steers came boiling up the shoot.

A few minutes later the stranger stood beside us on the slippery running board. As Milk River had predicted, his store pants were splashed to the knees and his shoes were mere gobs of mud. He appeared not to notice. Just stood there watching the crowding, shoving, half-crazed steers and breathing deeply of the steam that rose from their wet hides.

"D bar C," he said, after about half a carload had gone past. "That's Dave Crosby's brand. He's shippin' by the trainload, now, eh?"

"Yup," I answered. "Know Dave?"

"Used to, a long while back. He was jest gettin' his start, then. He's come up in the world since I—left the country." The man was tall and slender and soft of speech, and I noted that a pair of deep-set gray eyes looked out from a face of unhealthy pallor.

The Old Man came up as we socked the bar home and slid the door.

"Hello, Dave; don't you know me?" The stranger's voice held just a hint of reproach, that vanished in a smile as the Old Man grasped his hand after a moment of scrutiny.

"Charlie! Charlie Winter!" he shouted.

"What's left of him," grinned the man.

"Then, you—you're——"

"Pardoned," supplied the other. "Full an' complete pardon, along with an outfit of store clothes an' a few dollars, an' the governor's apology for a mistake that cost me—God, Dave, how many years is it I've be'n in their damned pen?"

"It's enough of 'em," answered the Old Man, and turned to us. "Boys, this is Charlie Winter, as good a cow-hand as ever rode. We'll go an' eat, now."

While the Old Man was washing up in the Chink's back room we herded Charlie Winter across the street to Ross's. When we got back a few minutes later, dinner was ready.

"Where you headin', Charlie?" asked the Old Man, as he scraped half a platter of fried eggs onto his plate.

"I ain't had time to figure much. They just turned me loose yesterday. Thought I'd sort of look around an' maybe hit the TU or the IX for a job. I suppose most of the outfits are full-up by this time, though."

"How'd you like to work for me? The D bar C ain't a big outfit, but we gather our own stuff, an' I'm short-handed. I figure on shippin' anyways one more trainload this fall."

"That would suit me fine, Dave. I'm soft as a woman, I suppose, but it won't take long to get into shape. You stake me to an outfit an' I'll be over to the corrals in an hour."

Dave told us to go along with Charlie, and at Ross's we located a saddle and bridle and spurs that some hombre had hung up for the drinks. He got the rest at O'Hanlon's.

It didn't take us long to find out that he didn't need any coaching on what to buy, and we were glad he had hooked up with us. When he had finished clear down to his bed-roll, we headed for the corrals. As we went out the door one of O'Hanlon's clerks handed him a package done up in paper. It was a sizeable package.

"What's this?" Charlie asked.

"It's your clothes—the ones you had on."

"Oh," said Charlie, "much obliged."

When we got out onto the sidewalk he stopped just long enough to toss the package out into the middle of the mud-churned street and watched with evident

satisfaction as it was tramped out of sight by one of Saul Thibbedeau's freight teams.

"The State of Montana has got its damned clothes back," he said, and then he filled his lungs and exhaled noisily as though to rid himself of the last taint of Deer Lodge.

CHARLIE may have been soft, but it didn't show up in his work. He knew the game, and we finished a couple of hours before supper. We'd camped the wagons out on Six Mile and Dave sent word to Scotty to pull for the mountains in the morning. We stayed in town that night and had supper at the Chink's. After supper, the Old Man set up the cigars all around an' Charlie grinned across the table.

"You're just bustin' to know how I come to get pardoned after all these years—only you don't like to ask," he guessed.

"Roped me the first throw," replied Dave.

"It all come about along of that breed, Teton." I sat up and took notice. "It seems he got mixed up in a cuttin' scrape over to the IX last summer, an' lit out. He hit for the Yellowstone country an' got in with a bunch of hair artists that was runnin' off horses an' sellin' 'em in Dakota. They got by with it for a spell, but at last a posse caught up with 'em. Durin' the scrap a posse man was killed an' Teton got shot in the shoulder an' run out of shells, so he give up. He was convicted an' sent up for life.

"They put him in the next cell to mine, an' I seen that his nerve was plumb gone. It made me want to choke him, the way he carried on nights, whimperin' an' prayin'. I tried to brace him up, but it wasn't no use. One night I was layin' in my bunk wishin' he'd shut up so I could sleep, when I heard him call my name. The cells have got solid partitions between 'em, but by goin' over to the front after the guard goes you can talk to your next neighbor pretty handy. I got up an' went over."

"'Charlie,' he says, 'you there?'

"'Yes,' I says. 'What do you want?'

"'Charlie, I'm a-goin' to tell 'em all about it.'

"'Sure,' I says to him, plumb disgusted. 'Write a book about it. Only I ain't goin' to stand here on this cold floor all night. Go to bed.'

"'But you don't understand,' he says. 'I got somethin' on my mind. I can't sleep. I'm goin' to tell 'em in the mornin'.'

"'Go to it,' I says, thinkin' maybe I could catch me some sleep.

"'I'll tell the warden how it was me killed Billy Kirkpatrick that night on Milk River,' he whimpers. Well, sir, I couldn't hardly believe my ears.

"'What?' I yells, so loud the guard come runnin' up.

"That guard was a good fellow, an' when I told him what Teton said, he let him go ahead an' tell it, rules or no rules, with just us three standin' there in the middle of the night. Next mornin' he told the warden, an' in a week the governor himself come over from Helena, an' he told him. The governor asked me a lot of questions, an' a couple of days later my pardon come an' they turned me loose. I asked the warden if I could see Teton once more. I kind of wanted to thank him for tellin'. He went along with me.

"'There's one thing you ain't told me, what did you do it for?' I asked after we talked for a while.

"'For Cincinnati, of course. I' know'd they'd lay it onto you. An' with you an' Billy both out of the way—well, I wasn't so bad lookin' them days.' He grinned.

"'Well?' I says.

"'Well, what?' he says, lookin' at me kind of curious. 'That's all, ain't it? You know I married her.'

"'No,' I says, 'I don't know. Where is she at now?'

"He laughed, a kind of nasty, raspin' laugh.

"'You'll find her,' he says.

"I turned an' followed the warden down the corridor, an' all the way I could hear that damn breed laughin' and laughin'."

Charlie Winter paused and lighted his cigar.

"You see," he continued, "what a lot of things that pardon depended on, each one workin' into the next. If there hadn't been no cuttin' scrape he wouldn't of got mixed up with the brand doctors. If that bullet had hit him a little lower down he couldn't have told, an' if he'd 've got over the line an' been sent to the Dakota pen where he wouldn't 've saw me, the chances is he wouldn't 've told. But, shucks, you can go on followin' things back to the first start an' you wouldn't get nowheres. It's the happenin's theirselves that counts, not what makes 'em happen—that's luck."

I leaned forward and extended my hand.

"And here is the scar that sent Teton to the Yellowstone," I said.

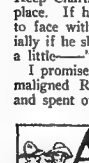
He sat for a long time running his fingers slowly over the scar.

"Well, it's all over an' done with," he said. Then, a trifle grimly, "They told me a man could pick up where he left off. We'll see."

As we shoved back our chairs the Old Man motioned me to one side and, peeling a couple of twenties off his roll, he slipped them into my hand.

"You boys go as you please, tonight," he ordered. "We can overtake the wagons tomorrow, even if we don't start till noon. There's jest one thing I want to tell you. Keep Charlie away from Roulette Jake's place. If he should happen to come face to face with Cincinnati, that way—especially if he should happen to be lickered up a little——"

I promised and put the others wise; we maligned Roulette Jake for the tinhorn and spent our money elsewhere.



ALONG toward noon, next day, Tex and I rolled out and filtered down to the Chink's for breakfast. Charlie Winter was a little ahead of us, when a woman stepped out of O'Hanlon's and met him face to face. Charlie kept right on—never noticed her. But the woman stopped as though she had frozen in her tracks. She stood for a moment staring like she had seen a ghost. She turned and took a couple of quick steps as if to overtake him, then stopped again and her hand flew to the front of her fur trimmed coat. Tex and I both recognized her the moment we saw her. She was the Lady of the Rings, Claire Sinclaire—Cincinnati McQueen.

While neither of us bucked faro much, we had a nodding acquaintance with her, being more or less in the habit of playing poker in Roulette Jake's place. She was coming toward us, walking slowly, her eyes staring straight ahead. She never saw us as she passed, and we went on to the Chink's, where Charlie was ordering ham-and, and the Old Man and Milk River were just shoving back their chairs.

"We'll pull out as soon as you boys get through," said the Old Man, putting on his hat and heading for the horse corral on the edge of the flats.

Breakfast that noon was sort of unconversational. We'd all been up late, and felt kind of—well, you know. When we got to the corral old Dave was all saddled up, waiting. Only he didn't have his own outfit. Horse, saddle, and bridle I recognized as Pete McClelland's. I asked him if he'd been trading, and he snapped out a "no" that set me saddling up without further remarks. We camped that night at the foot of Bird Trail, where Scotty was waiting with the wagons and a bang-up good supper.

The storm had quit and the wind gone down; one of those clear, cool October nights when a sagebrush fire feels good. We rolled cigarettes and the Old Man lighted a cigar. The setting was just right to coax a story out of old Dave about the good old days before the railroad. He liked to tell them and they were generally worth listening to. But tonight he was unusually silent. Tex and I gave him several leads, but all we got for our pains was a grunt. He wouldn't talk, and every now and then he'd slant a glance across at Charlie, who sat with his back propped against his bed-roll, and his hat pulled down over his eyes.

We'd caught that glance a couple of times during the afternoon while we were riding along the trail. It wasn't a very exciting caucus. The silence ran on for about an hour and I was thinking of rolling in, when Charlie Winter spoke up in a voice that sounded kind of hard and abrupt.

"Where's Cincinnati McQueen, Dave?" he asked.

"Why, she's—she's in White Horse. She—she goes by the name of Claire Sinclaire, now. She—" the Old Man was groping for his words and Charlie interrupted him gruffly.

"So that's what that damned breed meant—with his laughin', an' laughin'! 'You'll find her,' he says. By God, they better never turn him loose! If they do, they'll have me back there again; an' this time there won't be any mistake!"

The Old Man leaned forward.

"No! No! Charlie—not that—not what you're thinkin'!" he hurries to explain. "She's straight as a string! Though, Lord knows, what with her looks an' all, she's had chance enough to go the other way. She's a gambler, that's all; deals faro in Roulette Jake's place. Folks claims she banks her own game. It's the excitement she wants. She gambles to forget."

Beyond the little fire Charlie Winter rose slowly to his feet.

"Is that true, Dave? You ain't tellin' me that just to—to—just because——"

"It's gospel truth," interrupted the Old Man, gruffly.

"I'm goin' back to White Horse, Dave," said Charlie, and there was a tone in his voice we hadn't heard. "I'll pick up the outfit over on the South Slope in a day or so."

"Better wait till the mornin'," called the Old Man.

But the darkness swallowed Charlie Winter, and a few minutes later we heard the sound of hoof-beats growing fainter on the trail.

THE next morning the Old Man sent the wagons on to Cow Creek and he and I swung south to try and pick up a bunch of saddle horses that were supposed to be watering at the Lower Springs. Along toward noon we camped for lunch at the head of Tin Cup. We had ridden all morning in silence, which was not the Old Man's wont.

"What's on your mind?" I asked, when we had finished our sandwiches.

He lit a cigar and held onto the match till it burned his fingers. Then he swore—which, also, was not his wont.

"I don't know, exactly," he answered between puffs of blue smoke. "I thought, until Charlie asked me last night about Cincinnati, that you hadn't been able to keep them two apart." He paused and, getting no comment, continued: "It was while you boys was eatin' yesterday noon, I went down to the corral an' saddled up. I hadn't any more'n finished when I looked up an' there stood Cincinnati McQueen.

"'Lend me your horse, Dave,' she says, the same words she said to me years ago, standin' almost on the same spot.

"An', in spite of the years that's gone by, she looked the same as she did then—none of the costly clothes you've seen her wear; only for the rings on her fingers she was the same as long ago. Same dress, even, a blue one, split up the middle so she could ride straddle; no side-saddles for her. An' the look in her eyes was the same—a look a man don't like to see. An' I done just what I done that other time; I handed her the reins, an' then I stood an' watched her ride away acrost the flats with the sun on the blue of her dress makin' a bright spot that moved along the trail to Tin Cup, the same as—long ago."

"But," I protested, remembering the rotting buildings of the old McQueen ranch, "there is nothing on Tin Cup now."

"Mebbe not," answered the Old Man, speaking slowly. "I figured, then, that she'd seen Charlie Winter; but, now I know she didn't, I don't savvy——"

"But she did see him," I interrupted, and told him of the meeting Tex and I had witnessed on the street.

Abruptly, the Old Man rose and swung into the saddle.

"It's only about twenty miles down the crick to McQueen's," he said.

"But, the horses——"

"To hell with the horses!" he exploded, and I swung in beside him as he led off down the coulee.

As we rounded the last bend we pulled up. There stood Dave's horse with the saddle and bridle on, snipping grass in front of the rotting cabin. He saw us and whinnied, and we rode up and swung off. Without a word, we stepped through the door of the cabin. In the middle of the floor, the woman I had known as Claire Sinclaire lay—dead. It was late afternoon, and as the sun sank behind the rim of Tin Cup, the last rays touched her finger rings in a blaze of fire. Then, the fire went out. I looked for a moment into the white face. It was different, somehow, from the face I had seen across Roulette Jack's faro layout. The hard lines were gone. The lips seemed almost to smile.

"We better camp here, boy," said the Old Man, when we found ourselves outside. "I don't like to—to leave her alone. The coyotes, or——"

I nodded.

"It won't be very cold," I added, "We've got the saddle blankets, and we can take turns sitting up."

It must have been along about nine o'clock. The Old Man was on guard, and maybe I had got to sleep. Anyway, I heard it about as soon as he did—the sound of a horse's hoofs. Someone was riding up the trail, riding hard! We caught sight of him as he cut the skyline where the trail dips over the rim; then the blackness swallowed him up, and a minute later Charlie Winter pulled up his lathered horse beside the fire. He swung to the ground and started for the cabin, but the Old Man blocked the doorway.

"Don't go in there," he said, but Charlie brushed him aside.

We heard him stumble. A match flared up, and another, and another. I can see it now—a million stars overhead, the flicker of the little flames on the rotted cabin logs, the black rectangle of the door-

way, a big white star on the rim of Tin Cup like a searchlight looking down. And silence. God, it was still! The Old Man's fingers closed on my arm in a grip that hurt. Then his fingers relaxed.

Charlie Winter stood in the doorway; his face showed white in the light of the flickering flames as the face of her back there in the dark. We walked over and sat down by the fire. It seemed like a long time before Charlie spoke, and when he did he pointed toward a little grove of trees that showed like a black patch on the bank of the dry creek.

"Over there, Dave," he said. "It's where her mother lays. We'll 'tend to it in the mornin'."

The Old Man nodded.

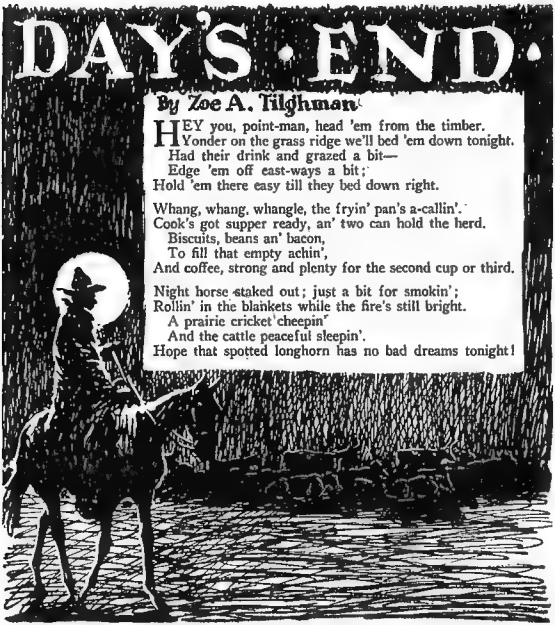
"How did you happen to come out here, Charlie?" he asked.

"In town, it was, someone told me they seen her ride out acrost the flats. You see, I didn't know Tin Cup was like this. I thought she was headin' for—home."

There was another long silence, longer than before, and when Charlie spoke again it was as though resignation battled with bitterness.

"They told us—back there in Deer Lodge—that you could begin all over again. But not where we left off, Dave—God, no! Not where we left off!"

A coyote howled in the distance. The fire burned down to red coals. And the big white star was gone from the rim of Tin Cup.



A TIP FROM JIM BOWIE

By JAMES K. WATERMAN

Author of "The Sea Fox" and "Cracking the Black Joke"

Far different from the Western haunts of Jim Bowie was this evil West African seaport, but, when his life and honor hung in the balance, the Sea Fox pinned his faith on the weapon and wisdom of the old plainsman

ONE!" exclaimed Cap'n Pepper, the Sea Fox.

"Two!" announced Tom Dollar, the mate.

"Three!" chimed in Robin Hood, the huge black bosun.

Three puffs of blue smoke shot up, one after the other in rapid succession, from the west side of Grande Peak as the American slaver brigantine *Wild Pigeon* approached, just after sunrise; Princes Island (Lat. 1-38 N.; Lon. 7-25 W.) in the Gulf of Guinea.

The little lines of worry knitting the captain's brows vanished.

"That means the coast is clear; no cruisers prowling about," he observed, rapidly scanning the fretted row of peaks towering above dense forests of tropical trees in this volcanic flower garden. "Brace forrad a'gin, Robin Hood, an' if this wind holds we'll be in time to have breakfast with the Wider Ferraro an' Rosella."

He mused a moment.

"You'll mind, Tom Dollar, I told ye of the time the widder's daughter nussed me for six weeks after one o' them English Johnny Wars had blowed us outa water t'other side of that there p'int, when I was mate of the *Peggy Spurl* Well, ye see, I'd gone up in the main crosstrees to clear the signal halliards so's to get our flag down an' let them cussed Britishers know we'd struck. Just then a red-hot shot plumps into our magazine an' the mast I'm on sails up into the air straight's a die, till I'm about on a level with the top o' that three thousand foot peak there, an' then we comes down so tarnal fast all the wind is drained plumb outa my body.

"Well, Tom Dollar, believe it or not, that mast swishes down—heel first, o' course, that end being the heaviest, an' buries itself for fifteen feet or more in the sandy beach. Sticks there as straight as a ramrod, an' me with my settin'-down place a-wedged into the arms o' the crosstrees so's I couldn't be shook off nohow. I didn't know all that happened after that, but when I got my bearings a'gin I was a-layin' in a room in Widder Ferraro's house an' her daughter, little Rosella—she was 'bout ten then—a-swabbin' my jowls with cold water.

"Seems I was the sole survivor, an' I'd probably 'a' passed 'the last frontier,' as the sayin' is, if the Widder an' Rosella hadn't nussed me so carefully; I was all shook up inside. Nat'rally I'm terrible fond of them two females, especially Rosella. She must be full-grown by this time. We ain't been here for two years or thereabouts. Keep her nor', nor'east," this to the helmsman. "An' Mr. Dollar, square yer fore yards; I'll tend to the

mains'l, an' we'll run in between Piconegro P'int an' Carocha Island."

The Sea Fox slacked off the main sheet so that the boom would just clear the backstays, and the beautiful clipper slaver, as if in answer to a rein, increased her speed and swept smoothly through the dark green water. The skipper went forward and, straddling his short, powerful legs on the fo'cas'le-head, conned her through the passage.

Past shaded heights down which dashed foaming cataracts the slavers sped, their nostrils titillating to the heavy scents from a thousand ripening fruits and flowers, until at eight o'clock they dropped anchor in twelve fathoms of water in East Bay.

Hardly had the ship put a strain on her cable when, leaving the efficient Robin Hood in charge, Cap'n Pepper and Tom Dollar went ashore in the dingy.

"Everythin' looks thrivin'," commented Cap'n Pepper as they stepped on the beach and he gazed up at the long, low, house of whitewashed brick partially hidden in a grove of orange trees and setting back some distance from the beach. "The Widder must be pretty well fixed. She owns two thirds o' this island an' she's got slaves enough to cultivate it. Yes, I reckon she's pretty comfortable. Well, I guess it ain't too early for us to pay our respects to her. Come on, Tom Dollar."

Half-way to the house the Sea Fox stopped suddenly beside a long Spanish thirty-two pounder half buried in the sand, a relic of the days when the island was a pirate resort.

"Funny we don't see nothin' o' Rosella, ain't it?" he remarked. "Right about here is where she allus used to come a-runnin' down to meet us, remember, Tom Dollar?"

The long, lanky mate tossed his quid carelessly into the rusted muzzle of the gun.

"Hell's flames, Cap'n; ye forgit she's older now," he replied. "She's prob'ly jest turned over for another nap. Them Portygee gals git mighty lazy when they get growed."

Cap'n Pepper shook his head, his broad, freckled face betraying not a little apprehension.

"Rosella ain't that kind. If she could she'd 'a' been here. Sunthin' must 'a' happened."

Something had, indeed. Five minutes later they found the Widow Ferraro, her eyes red from protracted weeping and her bosom still heaving from suppressed sobs. Rosella had gone; vanished from the island two nights prior to the arrival of the Sea Fox.

IN HALTING, stifled phrases, with the tears coursing anew down her fat, doughy cheeks, the poor Portuguese mother told her American friends all she knew concerning the sudden disappearance of her eighteen year old daughter. Stripped of all hysterical verbiage it amounted to this: a Spanish slaver brig, the *Emprendadora*, from Havana, bound to the African coast, and commanded by the nortorious Captain Narcisco Guerra, had dropped anchor in East Bay on the preceding Wednesday. The widow had extended to him the hospitality of her house as she did all ship officers calling there. And she had supplied his ship with fruit and vegetables, for which he had paid liberally.

Captain Guerra had sailed sometime Thursday night, and the following morning Rosella was missing. The island had been combed high and low, but no trace of the girl had been found and her mother was therefore fully convinced that Guerra had abducted her.

During the silence which followed this recital the Sea Fox produced a quill toothpick from a pocket and chewed it thoughtfully.

"Did Rosella take anything with her," he asked finally.

"Nothing but what she stood in. That's what makes me believe that Captain Guerra took her away forcibly," replied the widow.

"Did Guerra say what factory he was a-goin' to?" asked the Sea Fox, after pondering over this for a while.

"No."

"Your men didn't see nothin' around the decks that would give any idee where she was bound, did they? No cases marked with the consignee's name or such like, Mrs. Ferraro?"

"No." She thought a moment or two and then added despondently, "I have questioned all of them; there was nothing like that. The only distinctive thing about the brig I remember was Rosella's telling me that she was very much amused at a large gray parrot in the cabin that was continually calling, 'cha-cha,' 'cha-cha,' or some such senseless thing."

"Cha-cha!", repeated the Sea Fox, clamping his heavy jaws on the toothpick.

"That word mebbe ain't so silly as it sounds." He cast a meaning glance at his mate, who nodded his head as if in answer to a question.

Cap'n Pepper glanced at his watch.

"It is now 8:53. By ten o'clock I wanta be gittin' my anchor." he told Mrs. Ferraro. "An' I wish you would kindly hustle up yer men an' keep putting fresh provisions aboard up to that time. An' ye might have some o' your help put some fodder on that table at the end o' the veranda where me an' my mate ate when we was here last. We'd certainly 'preciate it."

The widow's dark eyes flashed gratefully. This abrupt departure could mean but one thing—the Sea Fox was going to look for her daughter. This and the latent power suggested by every movement of this stocky, five-foot-five slaver comforted and put new heart into her. As quickly as she could raise her stout figure from her chair she hastened to do his bidding.

The two slavers, left alone, sat in silence, the Sea Fox grinding away at the toothpick, his shaggy brows knitted in deep thought.

Two slave girls came and began laying the table with snow-white linen and old-fashioned silverware. This done they motioned for the slavers to take their seats and almost immediately set before them curried eggs and a steaming platter of savory chicken ragout. A large pot of coffee mingled its fragrant aroma with the delicious scents from the flowers in the garden.

Finally, with a grateful sigh, the Sea Fox tilted back in his chair and produced another quill toothpick.

"Tom Dollar, what are ye a-thinkin' on?" he asked abruptly.

"The same thing you be, Cap'n," grinned the mate.

"An' what is that, Tom Dollar?"

"Hell's flames! Anyone can see ye're all he't up about that there parrot on the *Emprendadora* bawlin' 'cha-cha' all the time. Ain't it a fact?"

"You've hit it, Tom Dollar. An' what d'yer make of it?"

"Why, it's all as plain's a tar-pot in a barl o' flour to me, Cap'n. Guerra got that parrot from Cha-cha of Ayudah."

"Exactly, Tom Dollar," agreed the Sea Fox, with an admiring glance at his mate.

There was a long pause, during which each was engaged in searching the tablets of his memory in an effort to recall all that he had heard about this remarkable trader, Señor Da Souza, better known on the coast as Cha-cha.

But all the slavers knew about him was that he was a native mulatto from Brazil; that he had deserted from the Brazilian army and shipped on a slaver for Dahome. Here after some terrible adventures, he had finally won the favor of the rich King of Dahome and had now become the second most opulent factor on the coast. His was a one-man town and he was that man. Striving to emulate the gaudy court of his protector, the king, he had everything that could add to the pleasures of human existence brought from London, Paris, and Havana and offered for sale in Ayudah. In short, he had surrounded himself with all that could corrupt virtue, gratify passion, tempt avarice, betray weakness, satisfy sensuality, and complete a picture of incarnate slavery in Dahome.

As all this floated through the mind of the Sea Fox he groaned audibly.

"Tom Dollar," he announced solemnly, "if Rosella had s'arched all through hell she couldn't 'a' found a worse place than she's boun' for now. / Nor two greater mates of the devil that this Cha-cha an' that Spaniard, Guerra. I dunno so much about the Spaniard, he's only been running slaves about three years an' has never crossed my bawse; but from what I've heard o' him he's a bad egg. He's a bully an' a braggart, but he ain't a coward by no means. They say he don't know what fear is an' I guess that's right for he's a reg'lar shark at fightin' duels. He's already killed six men that way, Tom Dollar."

"I know. I heerd 'bout it," returned the mate.

"Now," continued the Sea Fox, "I dunno which is the prime mover in this here case, Cha-cha or Guerra. But I b'lieve if Rosella's been stole it's Cha-cha's doing, for I don't think Guerra would go that far without heavy backin'." He got on his feet. "We'd better be gettin' under way, right now, Tom Dollar, an' make Ayudah as quick's God an' the wind 'll let us."

While taking leave of the Widow Ferraro the Sea Fox said, "I can't tell ye my plans, Mrs. Ferraro, for I dunno myself jest yet how I'm a-goin' to work. But I aim to kill two birds with one stun', get Rosella an' my cargo at the same time, see? So don't worry no more'n ye can help. If it's a posible thing you'll have yer gal back safe an' sound soon. Come on, Tom Dollar."

To avoid the mother's trembling thanks he pulled the mate hastily down the veranda steps with him, and in a little while they were mounting the side of their ship.

The *Wild Pigeon* made the run of four hundred and thirty miles in fifty-one hours, having light winds part of the way. At four o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon in June, she brought up to her anchor in the open roadstead of Ayudah. A cable's length away were the raking masts and black, swan-like hull of the Spanish slaver *Emprendadora*.

THE SEA FOX smiled as he read her name through his glasses.

"Mr. Parrot," he declaimed aloud, "you was a bird o' good omen."

"Hell's flames, I hope so," agreed Tom Dollar heartily. Then his naturally long face lengthened. "But I jest can't figger out how ye're a-goin' to get to win'ard of Guerra an' fill up with slaves at the same time. Not as tight as we be right now."

It was a fact. They were extremely hard pressed. Business reverses suffered by the vessel's New York owner, Calvin Gale, had compelled the ship to sail with sufficient specie and trade goods to buy only one fifth of the cargo she could carry. It had been the Sea Fox's intention to consign his ship to his friend, Duke Ephraim of Old Calabar, who would have extended him credit on his note. Now the Rosella episode had forced him to discard this plan.

"It's a mess, I'll admit," conceded Cap'n Pepper. "I never had no dealin's with this here Cha-cha, an' he ain't the kind o' man I'd ask any favors of if I had. But leave it to me, Tom Dollar, I ain't been pacin' the deck half the night since we left Princes Island for nothin'."

Cha-cha had built a palatial residence near the site of an old abandoned Portuguese fort. A large gambling casino stood a hundred yards or so further west. This near-palace and gambling hell, as well as the other houses of the little town, were painted an immaculate white and were roofed with tiles of a dull yellow. It was evident, at a glance, that no expense had been spared to make this African Monte Carlo a haven of luxurious rest for the tired slaver coming in with his hold full of trade goods and specie.

Through his glasses the Sea Fox could see guests seated at tables on the verandas of Cha-cha's house sipping their wine; but the surf was roaring inshore as high as a three-story house, thundering and lathering on the broad beach so that landing was impossible, for some hours at least.

Cap'n Pepper's chief anxiety was for Rosella. As soon as possible he sent his steward, Vicente, a diplomatic New Orleans Spaniard, aboard the *Emprendadora* to learn all he could about the girl. Nothing is more natural than for one steward to visit another, whereas had the Sea Fox gone himself it would have undoubtedly excited comment that would have reached Guerra's ears. This the American slaver wished to avoid for the present.

Vicente returned about dusk and reported that Guerra had taken Rosella ashore immediately upon the arrival of the vessel on Monday morning and that the *Emprendadora's* steward was firmly convinced that Miss Ferraro was desperately in love with the handsome Spanish captain.

Whatever the Sea Fox thought about this he kept to himself, but showed a decided interest when Vicente further informed him that Guerra had come to the coast well provided with specie and that in consequence Cha-cha had promised him a quick dispatch.

"Which means I gotta get busy," decided Cap'n Pepper.

The surf subsiding during the night, the next morning, at eight o'clock, Cha-cha dispatched a canoe for the *Wild Pigeon's* captain. The latter was well known by reputation to this African nabob, though the two had never met. As the American was reputed to have made several successful voyages, Cha-cha surmised that he had plenty of money and had undoubtedly come to Ayudah with a fat invoice.

Accordingly the reception of the Sea Fox by this hollow-cheeked, sodden-eyed mulatto was effusive in the extreme. He insisted that the American should make the big house his headquarters during his stay in port and promised, with a sly wink, that the captain should not suffer for the want of entertainment.

Cap'n Pepper, knowing his man, politely declined the other's flattering offers. His ship was his home, he said, and after pretending to be greatly impressed by the trader's striking personality he excused himself for a while and went off for a stroll.

The Sea Fox spoke Spanish and a half-dozen coast dialects with almost the fluency of the native, and, by a tip bestowed

judiciously here and there, he soon found himself in front of a house in a street back of the Casino, partially surrounded by a grove of high palm-pines. Two rows of paw-paw trees bordered the fifty-foot path which led up to the veranda.

Swaggering down this path to the street was a tall, well set-up Spaniard of about thirty-five, who, despite his foppish attire, bore the marks of a sailor.

His long black eyes, hard and bright as enamel, narrowed a little as they flashed on the American, and his carefully curled mustache lifted in a half sneer as he swung by.

"A reg'lar rearin', tearin' swashbuckler ye think ye be, don't ye?" was Cap'n Pepper's mental reservation as he watched the broad shoulders and trim waist of the Spaniard disappear around the corner. "That's Guerra, all right, from the description I've had give me. Well, ye child-snatcher ye, I've an' idee we'll be better 'quainted afore long."

He began walking up the path toward the house when he suddenly caught sight of a large girl, plump almost to stoutness, staring at him with wide eyes from her post on the edge of the veranda. It was Rosella.

HE was dressed in a gown of glaring yellow silk and wore a large bow of the same material and color in her black hair, which was coarse and thick as a mane. Beautiful she was not, her heavy countenance being redeemed only by a pair of magnificent black eyes and a clear olive complexion.

Her voice caught in an exclamation of delight not unmixed with a shade of consternation as the Sea Fox came up to her.

"*Capitan* Pepper!" she cried. "*Es possible?*" With the impulsiveness of her Latin nature she flung her arms around his thick neck and kissed him warmly on either cheek.

The captain laughed as she finally disengaged herself and, leaning back against a hammock, surveyed him with an air of smiling bewilderment.

"Must be possible, Rosella, seein' that here I be," he answered, slumping easily into a chair. "Mighty han'some gal ye got to be since I seen ye last, I must say. But ain't ye a long ways from hotne, Rosella?"

The girl bent her head, her fingers playing nervously with the string of amber beads about her neck.

"In course I dunno's it's any o' my bus'ness but nat'rally I'm considerable interested in the gal that nussed me through that sickness o' mine. An' another thing, Rosella," he fixed her with his piercing eyes, "yer mother is plumb worried to death about ye."

At the mention of her mother the girl's eyes filled and within the next ten minutes he had the story.

She had eloped with Guerra, who, according to her, was the personification of beauty, generosity, and kindness. His attitude toward her throughout had been that rare combination of lover and brother; they were to be married as soon as he got his cargo of slaves.

"How soon will that be?" asked the Sea Fox, pricking up his ears.

"Cha-cha promises them in four days," she counted on her fingers, "that will be about Monday. And then——"

She clasped her hands raptly.

The Sea Fox sighed.

At this juncture an old Soosoo woman, of an ashy dark color and wrinkled like a nutmeg, appeared in the doorway and gave him an evil stare before she scuttled back into the house.

"Who was that ant'deluvian critter?" asked the Sea Fox.

"That is Kyer, my *duenna*, and," she added proudly, "Narcisco has already given me two slave girls."

Cap'n Pepper grunted and switched the conversation to reminiscences of her island home. After another ten minutes he rose and held out his hand.

"Ye seem to be all right so far, Rosella; but in case any 'mergency rises don't forget that yer mother is spendin' some little time every day on her knees about ye," he said. "Good day."

Cap'n Pepper walked thoughtfully up the street, pondering on his next move. He had not gone very far when, as luck would have it, he ran into an old acquaintance, Mafucca John, a slave broker whom he had known in bygone days around Bonny. From him the Sea Fox learned that Guerra had already, during the past two years, furnished Cha-cha's harem and Casino with several girls whom he had brought to Ayudah in precisely the same manner as he had Rosella.

Cap'n Pepper lunched with the broker and then, taking his leave, made his way down to the slave barracoons in the northwest part of the town. Here again he

found it necessary to dip into his pocket, whereupon the captain of the barracooniers, or slavemaster, melted into a state of graciousness and showed his visitor about.

In the barracoon alloted to the *Emprendadora* were already two hundred and fifty slaves, fine husky creatures, with the exception of two which the expert eye of the Sea Fox noted had been doctored with a mixture of gunpowder and lemon-juice to make them look plump and shiny. Only the yellow eyeballs and swollen tongue showed the cheat.

"What would ye say now if ye wanted to call a man some partic'ly bad names?" inquired the Sea Fox as he was about to go.

The slave-master grinned. "A man gets pretty good at that in this business, Captain. I would begin by calling him a coward, a poltroon, a liar, a slanderer of the unfortunate, a grave-robber, a——"

"Good 'nough!" chuckled Cap'n Pepper. "That's the real p'izen an' no mistake. Now, does Cap'n Guerra ever come down here?"

"Yes. I expect him in an hour or so. He comes every afternoon. He's a gay dog is Captain Guerra, but he tends to business."

"That's fine. Now listen careful. When he comes ye jest call him all them names ye jest mentioned an' as much more's ye can think on, an' tell him that's what Cap'n Pepper said he is."

The slave-master's eyeballs protruded in astonishment. He looked at the American aghast.

"Why, Captain," he cried, "I won't do that. It would be your sentence to death. Captain Guerra would immediately call you out and kill you. He's a regular fire-eater of the *code duello*. I myself saw him kill two opponents on the beach right abreast of your own vessel, Captain, and they say he has killed at least seven more in Havana."

"I know all about that," interposed the Sea Fox, "an' I don't s'pose I'm any match for Guerra. But jest the same I gotta have my little joke. An' I'm mighty glad Guerra is so all-fired touchy, for it ain't no fun stirrin' up a man with no spirit. Now ye jest do as I ask ye an' ye won't lose by it."

The sudden pressure of a gold piece on the palm of his hand swept away the slave-master's scruples and he promptly agreed to do as the slaver desired.

After learning of two other resorts which Guerra frequented the Sea Fox took his departure.

"You may think it is going to be a good joke, my fine Captain," observed the slave-master, looking at the slaver's retreating figure, "but God help you when Guerra hunts you out, as he will surely do. Well, it is none of my affair. You've paid me to do it and I will."

HE DID, as did the two proprietors of the other resorts whom the Sea Fox had paid to do the same thing. Cap'n Pepper could not have chosen better emissaries for his purpose. All of the thre cordially hated the arrogant, swaggering bully, and this chance to tell him to his face what they thought of him without danger to their own skins was too good to be lost.

Accordingly the three deputies spent all of the time until Guerra put in an appearance in recalling the most insulting vilifications which their memories had retained after years of intercourse with a class who have reduced calumny to a fine art. Trust a Spaniard or a Portuguese for applying the acid with a serene deftness.

"Really, Captain Guerra, such an extraordinary request. The Americano must be insane. At first I refused. I warned him of your prowess, dear Captain Guerra; but he insisted that I tell you in his very words—" And then began the broadside.

When at four o'clock he burst out, with flaming eyes, from the last resort, there was not a madder man from the Senegal to the Congo than Captain Narcisco Guerra. Rosella had informed him of the captain's visit that morning and Guerra, in consequence, at once jumped to the conclusion that this covert attack on the part of the American was the result of jealousy; withqut a doubt Cap'n Pepper wanted Rosella for himself.

For over an hour Guerra strode agitatedly up one street and down another, looking into all the places where a sea-faring man would be likely to go; but he saw no sign of the Sea Fox. Meanwhile the man he was raving to meet was reclining at his ease under a big cotton tree, secure from prying eyes but where he could see plainly the gate of Guerra's barracoon. To judge by the placid expression of his countenance one could hardly believe that he had, of his own free will, deliberately started

a game, the stakes of which were the biggest a man can ever play for—his own life, and a friend's honor.

A little before sundown the Sea Fox got slowly to his feet.

"Lemme see, now," he mused, fixing his eyes on a tiny gray monkey that had been seated on the lower limb of an adjacent tree for the last hour.

"Accordin' to what the slave-master told me an' what I've seen myself, there's been sixty slaves gone into Guerra's barracoon this day. If they keeps coming in at this rate he'll get his complement of five hundred and fifty about Sat'day sometime, instead of Monday as Rosella thought. Now five hundred and fifty slaves will fill up the *Wild Pigeon* nicely, very nicely indeed. So far, so good. *Adios* Mrs. Monk; I'm a-goin' to see what sorta grub this Cha-cha pervides—that is, if I don't run foul o' Guerra a-thirstin' for my gore."

The dying sun swept his path with a purple splendor as he made his way into the town. He chuckled to himself as he noticed the looks of awed surprise bestowed on him by pedestrians he met, for the news had spread like wild-fire that the Yankee slaver captain had had the suicidal rashness to wantonly insult the terrible Guerra.

The startled looks of these people, with the interest he excited among the patrons of the eating place, convinced him that his last three tips had borne abundant fruit. This was confirmed when Captain Walters, the bluff, hearty skipper of a Liverpool bark lying in the harbor, took a seat at the same table.

"I don't think you'll take it amiss, Captain, if I tell you that Guerra is hunting high and low for you," he said, after introducing himself. "That Spaniard is bad enough at any time, but he's half-drunk now and ready for anything. I merely wanted to let you know how the thing stands and put you on your guard."

The Sea Fox thanked him.

"Jest a little joke o' mine, Cap'n," he explained; "that Spanish dandy sorta riled me this mornin' when I see him a-blusterin' about as if he owned all creation, so I guessed I'd have a little fun with him. That's all."

The English skipper looked at him quizzically for a long moment, mentally concluding that this Yankee, whose craglike features were as impressive as so much granite, was either as cunning as his nickname implied or else he was a consummate idiot. The Englishman was more inclined to the former supposition until, a little later in the evening, something happened that left him completely in the air, hardly knowing what to think.

NIGHT fell. The soft sky was star-gemmed and the land breeze, which had set in at sundown, soothingly fanned the cheeks of the two skippers as they left the place and picked their way across the square to the Casino, now ablaze with lights.

This gambling establishment was one big room a hundred and twenty feet long and fifty wide. It was lighted by three immense chandeliers and by oil lamps in gilded brackets placed along the walls. All the paraphernalia for gaming was here and also two billiard tables. And in the back part of the room was a mahogany bar presided over by two silk-shirted bartenders, who spoke half a dozen languages.

As the Sea Fox and his companion entered, there arose a hum of voices like the sound of bees swarming above their hive, but the play went on as usual. Cha-cha, accompanied by his bodyguard of two of the dreadful Amazons of Kumasi, greeted them cordially. He knew, of course, what was in the minds of all present, but so far it was no business of his.

The two mariners sat down on a lounge about midway on the west side of the room and began watching the animated scene, the Britisher smoking a cigar and the Sea Fox chewing nonchalantly on the inevitable quill toothpick. Beautiful half-caste women, clad in Paris gowns, strolled about the vast room, attentive to their business of luring lookers-on to try their luck at the tables; it was significant that not one of them approached the Sea Fox. Indeed it seemed that since his entrance there had been a deadening of the atmosphere; the sort of stifling calm that presages the hurricane.

For half an hour nothing happened. Then, of a sudden, there came the sound of a high neighing laugh, and the tall form of Guerra appeared between the heavy, green plush portiers which hung across the wide arched doorway. The Spanish captain had evidently dressed for the occasion. He sported a new white beaver hat, and he wore a scarlet jacket ornamented down the front with a double row of solid gold buttons and stopping just short of a broad red and blue silk sash. This contained a

pair of silver mounted pistols and also concealed the belt that upheld the silver-hilted cutlass hanging down his left leg. The laces of his slashed trousers bottoms were fastened to tiny gold buttons, the last one of which was reflected in patent leather boots of the latest design.

He stood there in the doorway, glancing about the room until all were enabled to have a good look at his magnificent presence, and then advanced with rapid strides toward the Sea Fox. Instantly all play was suspended, the room became hushed, and Cap'n Pepper at once became the center of attraction.

"Here comes Guerra! Look out now. He means mischief," whispered the Britisher to the Sea Fox, who, with his hands resting on his thick, muscular legs, was staring straight before him but taking in everything out of the corner of his eye.

"'Sall right. Cap'n," he rejoined. "I gotta face the music, I s'pose. I can't get away from him now nohow."

The next instant Guerra stood before them, the light from the chandeliers blazing in a myriad of rays from the polished buttons. There was a loud stir as the players at the tables rose from their seats and craned their necks.

Shifting the toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other, the Sea Fox looked up into the glaring eyes of the Spaniard whose thin features were twitching with rage, his upper lip drawn up so that the ends of his mustache were well above the wings of his nostrils. He hissed like a snake as he prepared to give vent to his fury.

"Get to one side, will ye?" requested the Sea Fox, in Spanish, his deep voice booming through the room. "Ye're a-standin' in my way. I can't see."

A murmur of admiration went up from the assemblage. The American was running true to form.

Tongue-tied with passion and with flecks of foam appearing on his lower lip, Guerra stooped and spat squarely into the eyes of the Sea Fox.

"Can you see better now?" he shrilled.

THEN his long arm shot out and, clutching the other's collar, he jerked him to his feet. After shaking the Sea Fox as a terrier does a rat, Guerra administered the crowning insult, two kicks delivered with all his force.

Wrenching himself loose, Cap'n Pepper backed toward the door as Cha-cha came running up and the two Amazons crossed their spears before the frenzied Guerra.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," cautioned Cha-cha, "you know the rules; no quarreling in the rooms."

At the door the Sea Fox stopped and, after wiping his face calmly with a handkerchief, addressed the disappointed audience, who had expected, at the least, a challenge given and accepted.

"I want ye to understan', folks, that I don't retract a word I said about this cuss," Cap'n Pepper said. "He's all I said he is an' more. An' I tell ye right now that if I wasn't troubled with rheumatiz I might fight him."

"My God!" ejaculated the British skipper, and threw the butt of his cigar vehemently into a spitoon.

Cap'n Pepper's little speech was greeted with hoots, groans and bursts of derisive laughter. Guerra endeavored anew to get by the Amazons and pursue the Sea Fox, who, just then, disappeared through the door.

"Don't be foolish, Captain Guerra," Cha-cha murmured in his ear. "If you kill him now you get nothing but his life. Let the matter rest in my hands and I think we can get him and that splendid vessel of his besides."

Guerra's temporary madness had not effected his natural acquisitiveness in the least, and he gradually became quite calm. After all, was he not the hero of the hour; had he not exposed the famous Sea Fox and proved him to be nothing but a monstrous bluffer? So he adjourned to the bar with Cha-cha and some captains whose vessels were anchored along the bight waiting for trade.

"Them bloody Yankees is nothing but a lot o' bloomin' bags of wind," declared one of them. "How'd he get that name o' Sea Fox, I'd like to know?"

"Why, Captain, can't you see?" answered another. "The name is most appropriate. A fox never fights, you know; it just steals something and runs away with it."

A roar of laughter followed this sally and glasses clinked.

"By gar!" chimed in a French skipper, wiping his immensely long mustaches. "You say de Sea Fox no fight, eh? I say de man must be seek tonight. You forget, gentlemeen, how t'ree year ago he make the *Amitista* strike her colors, I theenk."

At this the group were suddenly struck dumb, staring in some perplexity at one another, for there was no gainsaying the fact that the Sea Fox had decisively beaten off the Spanish man-of-war in question despite her heavier armament and greater number of men.

Cha-cha broke the silence.

"There are different phases of bravery, gentlemen," he commented in his easy, graceful way. "The Sea Fox is brave, undoubtedly, when he is backed up by that fighting crew of his and those two officers that are as good as ten ordinary men. *Si*, but in the duel where there is no cheering, no stimulating smell of gunpowder—ah, gentlemen, he shrinks from that. You all saw tonight. The idea of going out on that beach alone to fight a man like Captain Guerra was too much for him. It is the *code duello* that shows a man in his true colors, for it is a fact that never does a pistol look grimmer or steel so naked as when one man is facing another on the field of honor."

Here Guerra joined in, swearing that he would never rest satisfied until he had wiped out the insult in Cap'n Pepper's blood, and that he would take such measures as would force the bluffer to fight him.

At this juncture a self-effacing little man with the dark complexion of a Spaniard quietly emptied his glass and glided unnoticed from the room. It was Vicente, the steward of the *Wild Pigeon*.

Meanwhile Cap'n Pepper had procured a canoe and been taken off to the ship.

"Hullo, is that you, Cap'n?" asked Tom Dollar, advancing through the darkness of the poop to meet him. "Any good news, Cap'n?"

"The best, Tom Dollar. It mebbe is a little soon to say it yet, but, if I'm any judge, I calculate on being bound out afore this time next week with Rosella aboard an' a full cargo o' slaves. How does that strike ye?"

"Hell's flames! It hits me to a T, Cap'n. But I'm damned if I see how ye're a-goin' to do it."

"Well, I see, Tom Dollar; so jest leave it to me."

Half an hour later Vicente came aboard and reported to his master the discussion which had ensued upon Cap'n Pepper's abject retirement. The Sea Fox chuckled and then told Vicente that until further orders he was relieved from all his duties as steward and that he was to remain ashore during the daytime, checking up on the slaves entering Guerra's barracoon and trying to ascertain the identity and addresses of the girls that Guerra had consigned to the hectic life of Ayudah.

Early the next morning the Sea Fox sent the boat ashore to fill two gunny-sacks with the fine beach sand. Until the boat returned he busied himself making a bag of light canvas, about six feet long and, when filled, about the diameter of the body of an average man. When the sand was brought he mixed some of it with farina —cereal slave-food—carefully weighing it on the scales as he added more farina, until, when the bag was filled and sewn up, it was the exact weight he desired, one hundred and eighty pounds.

"I b'lieve the Old Man has gone clean crazy!" ejaculated Tom Dollar as, some twenty minutes later, he happened to look down through the skylight into the cabin and descried a most remarkable scene. Flat on his back in the middle of the carpet lay Cap'n Pepper, and, as the mate stared, he saw Robin Hood pick up the heavy bag and toss it on the prostrate form of the skipper. Had it landed on him, it would undoubtedly have done some injury. While it was still in the air, however, the captain's powerful legs shot up and intercepted it with the soles of his boots.

Cap'n Pepper continued this curious practice at regular intervals during that and the next day, until at last he could juggle the bag with the ease and dexterity of a circus clown doing the same thing with a ball.

At three o'clock that afternoon Cha-cha came aboard, bearing a challenge from Guerra to meet him on the beach in mortal combat; as an inducement for the American to fight him the Spaniard offered to wager the valuation of the *Wild Pigeon* in gold coin against the vessel itself, winner take all.

"Humph!" the Sea Fox burst out. "I I think I see yer hand in this, Cha-cha. Wanta have my life an' vessel too, do ye? Ye know mighty well what sorta chance I stan' ag'in Guerra. He's a dead shot an' I can't hit a barn door; an' they say he eats with a sword. No sir, Cha-cha, I value my life more'n that. Ye go back an' tell Guerra he'll have to increase his offer some considerable afore he'll get a chance to show his dexterity on me."

Cha-cha went back and reported this to Guerra.

"We shall never get him to fight you," mourned the mulatto, "not if I should

offer him the whole town. He is a coward to his very marrow. But we will see what we can do."

On the following afternoon, Friday, Guerra sent off a messenger with a letter to the Sea Fox. It implored him, if he had a spark of manhood left, to fight and to arrange the meeting as expeditiously as possible for Guerra's complement of slaves was about complete and he would have to sail very soon. The Spaniard wound up his epistle by offering to stake all of the slaves in his barracoon against the *Wild Pigeon* on the result of the combat. This was a powerful incentive, indeed, but the Sea Fox apparently betrayed but little interest.

"Go back," he told the messenger, "an' tell Guerra I'll give him my answer afore eight o'clock tonight."

Just before sundown Vicente came aboard to report.

"Keep the canoe alongside," said the Sea Fox. "I'll be sendin' ye ashore ag'in soon with a note. What ye got to tell me?"

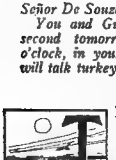
Vicente informed him that there were now five hundred and thirty slaves in Guerra's barracoon and that he had also learned the whereabouts of four girls who owed their present condition to the Spaniard.

After hearing this Cap'n Pepper scribbled a note to Cha-cha and sent the steward to deliver it. Cha-cha read the note aloud on the floor of the Casino and it created quite a sensation. It ran:

Señor De Souza:

You and Guerra meet me and my second tomorrow morning at seven o'clock, in your private room, and we will talk turkey.

Cap't. B. Pepper.



THE note dispatched, Cap'n Pepper got into the dingy and pulled over to the Liverpool bark. Captain Walters met him at the gangway with a cold stare.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked icily. "I have some accounts to go over, so please state your business in the shortest time and the quickest manner possible."

The Sea Fox grinned. "I jest come over, Cap'n, to tell ye that the time is come to give that Spaniard what he's a-hollerin' for, an' I want ye to be my second."

"By George, I'm your man!" cried the Britisher, with glistening eyes and grasping his visitor by the hand. "My time and everything I've got is yours. Come below, my dear fellow."

Half an hour was spent in the cabin discussing the various points of the coming affray and then the Sea Fox went back to his ship.

An hour before dawn, the next morning, the crew of the *Wild Pigeon* were roused and the guns double-shotted. The men were then dismissed and aft on the poop Cap'n Pepper informed his officers of the coming duel.

"If I get killed," he continued, "you'll be cap'n, Tom Dollar, an' whatever arrangements I might 'a' made with them sharks ashore is null an' void. The fight'll take place on the beach where ye can easily see ever'thin' with the glasses. If ye see my second wavin' a red han'kercher you'll know that I'm done for an' ye are at once to slip yer cable an' run to sea. If ye see me wave a white one ye haul taut on that spring ye got to the cable so's yer broadside will cover the town an' then await further orders. Oh, I forgot—if ye should have to go to sea without me, run down to Old Calabar an' do the best ye can there for Calvin Gale. That's all."

Daylight came. A little before seven the Sea Fox and the British captain appeared at Cha-cha's house. The Britisher was carrying under his arm what looked to be a small case of surgical instruments.

"You won't have to do any doctoring, Captain," remarked Guerra, casting a scowl at the Sea Fox. "I always do a good job."

"Now, gentlemen!" protested Cha-cha. "We are here to arrange matters quietly. There will be plenty of time for the other afterward. Come this way please."

He led the way to his office. On the table in the middle of the room were two shining cutlasses, already sharpened, and a pair of large-bore duelling pistols.

"Now," began Cha-cha, when they were seated. "Our first business, I believe, Captain Walters is to write out an agreement binding the stakes. That there may be no mistake, I cite them. Captain Guerra bets his five hundred and thirty slaves against Captain Pepper's vessel, the *Wild Pigeon*, that he wins the combat which is to go to the end. Is that right, Captain Walters?"

The latter nodded and Cha-cha, calling for his clerk, had two copies of the agreement made out, keeping one himself and

handing the other to Cap'n Pepper's second. Dismissing the clerk, Cha-cha broached the subject of weapons.

"Captain Pepper, as the challenged party, has the choice of weapons. There are some splendid ones there on the table, and, each pair being just alike, it——"

"Show 'em what I'm a-goin to fight with, Cap'n," the Sea Fox cut in, turning to his second.

The Britisher rose and, unrolling the leather case on the table, displayed two heavy bowie-knives with glittering twelve-inch blades—beauties that assuredly would have delighted the eye of Jim Bowie himself.

Cha-cha stared aghast at the lethal instruments a moment, then leaned toward Guerra.

"I've an idea we have been fooled in some manner I cannot fathom," he whispered.

Guerra tossed his head impatiently and sprang to his feet, his arched nostrils dilating with the blood-lust as his eyes rested on the shining steel. He had fought with knives before and liked the feel of one in his hand. Moreover, he had all the advantage, for he was seven inches taller than his opponent and had at least three inches more of reach.

"You couldn't have suited me better!" he snarled. "I came here to fight; knives or cannon, it is all the same to me. Come down to the beach and get it over quickly." He threw a triumphant look at the Sea Fox. "I'm to be married to Rosella at noon and have little time to spare. Come on!"

Captain Walters rolled up the knives again and the party made their way to the beach. Here the Britisher, as second to the challenged one, took charge. He had Cha-cha send for a coil of rope and a space fifty feet square was roped off to keep back the crowd that was surging down to the beach; the news had gone forth that the great fight was about to take place. Captain Walters insisted that no one be allowed between the combatants and the sea, which was agreed to without question.

THERE was not a cloud in the sky; the morning mist had also vanished, drunk up by the burning sun.

The two prepared for battle. The Sea Fox stripped to his undershirt and trousers which were held up by a belt. To prevent his trousers from slipping down in case the belt should be severed he had stitched the waistband to the undershirt with stout sail-twine. He wore the same glove-fitting calf-skin boots with the heavy soles and heels that he had worn while practising with the sand bag.

Captain Guerra doffed his gay jacket and rolled the sleeves of his silk shirt above the elbows of his sinewy arms. The Britisher felt over him for steel mesh and Cha-cha made a similar examination of the Sea Fox.

The combatants were handed their knives and stationed five paces from each other. For the last time, with a movement of his eyes nearly as swift as the click of a camera, the Sea Fox took in the scene: the palm-shaded little town, the broad sweep of silvery beach, the flashing of innumerable eyes as their excited owners crowded the ropes, the shimmering sea, and his beloved vessel and the flag under which so many bloody battles had been fought, flying from her peak.

"Are you all ready, gentlemen?" asked Captain Walters.

"Jest a second!" enjoined the Sea Fox. "You, Guerra, I think it but fair ye should know why I took so much pains to rile ye. Marm Ferraro is a friend of mine, for one reason; an' the other is that I wanted them slaves o' yourn. I'm all ready, Cap'n."

"Go!" shouted the seconds, removing their hands from the principals' shoulders and hurriedly stepping back out of the way.

"This is going to be a bloody wicked fight," observed a cockney captain; "they're both hard as nails and can stand lots of cutting."

Then as Guerra leaped toward the Sea Fox a hush fell over the crowd, broken only by the sobbing of the surf.

With right arm easily extended and slowly moving the blade of his knife like the tail of a snake, Guerra circled about his adversary. Cap'n Pepper's sturdy body revolved slowly, in unison with the methodical movement of a capstan, his knife held, point out, half way down his right leg. Guerra, always the aggressor, suddenly changed his tactics to a series of jumps and feigned attacks, until, seeing an opening, he gave a tigerish spring, the knife in his hand sweeping like a scythe.

The Sea Fox leaped to one side, but not quite far enough to avoid the razor edged blade. It slashed the undershirt beneath

his left arm and made a slight cut. Worse followed. Apparently losing his balance in his effort to avoid the knife, the Sea Fox stumbled and fell flat on his back. In his apparent attempt to break the fall his own knife hand sank in the sand, carrying the weapon with it to the hilt, so that only the blade poked ineffectually above the ruffled floor of the beach.

A groan, deep as the rumbling of a great organ, went up from the spectators. Many turned their heads away. It was all over. In that position a man is absolutely at the mercy of his adversary. All the latter has to do is to plant his foot on the knife-arm of the fallen one and shove home the steel. Quick to take advantage of the seeming helplessness of the Sea Fox, with one bound Guerra was beside him. Cap'n Pepper threw his left arm over his face as if to ward off the sight of the lethal steel.

The long body of the Spaniard bent over him, shutting out the sun. Up went the knife. At the pause, the split second of time ere it descended, the legs of the Sea Fox, round and hard as bollards, flashed inward and then shot up, landing those stout-soled boots with terrific force into the pit of the other's stomach.

Guerra gave a horrible grunt, while his face turned an ashen color and the knife flew from his hand.

Hardly crediting their own eyes, the spectators watched with bated breath while those trained legs tossed the Spaniard spread-eagled in the air and then let him fall on the Sea Fox's knife, held waiting for him on the sand.

Rolling the body off, the Sea Fox got to his feet and wiped the blade on a handkerchief.

"Two minutes and thirty-three seconds it took you to do it, Captain," announced the Britisher, snapping shut his watch. "But a minute ago I wouldn't have bet a penny candle on your life."

In fact the end had come so suddenly that the audience was stunned; it was only when they saw four Kroomen bearing the body of Guerra away that they realized the Sea Fox had made good his bluff.

As is always the case, the crowd was with the winner and the victor was immediately surrounded by a knot of captains eager to congratulate him.

"I ain't got no time to hold a palaver, gentlemen," said the Sea Fox, "ye will have to excuse me, but I've got a lot to do."

PAYING no attention to the extended hands, he called Cha-cha and Captain Walters to one side.

"I wanta be under weigh by sundown," he told Cha-cha, "an' I wish you'd begin putting my slaves aboard."

"Come up to my office and we will talk it over," rejoined the mulatto, loath to see all this money escaping him.

"There ain't nothin' to talk over 'tall," retorted Cap'n Pepper, pulling a white handkerchief from the pocket of the coat he had just donned. "My second has a written agreement."

"Certainly," purred Cha-cha, "that part is all right; but I cannot begin putting your slaves aboard until tomorrow."

"An' give ye time to pick out all the good ones an' sub'stoot them winnowings ye got in your barracoon, eh? Howsomever, I was prepared for this."

The Sea Fox stepped to the water's edge and waved the handkerchief.

Almost instantly there came the clank of capstan pawls as his crew hove taut on the spring and the grim muzzles of the *Wild Pigeon's* starboard battery began to frown toward the shore.

"Well done, Tom Dollar!" cried the Sea Fox.

Then, turning to Cha-cha, he fixed the mulatto with eyes that were terrible in their intensity.

"Ye see how my guns are trained, don't ye? Well, if the first canoe-load o' my slaves ain't on the way to my ship inside of twenty minutes I'll blow that gingerbread palace o' yours to hell an' ye with it—get that?"

"You win, Cap'n," said Cha-cha, yielding with good grace. "Your slaves will all be aboard by sundown. And, if ever you want a job as general manager for me at a salary that would stagger you, please come to me."

With the slaves moving rapidly to his ship the Sea Fox heaved a sigh and started on what he considered the worst job of all—to get Rosella and tell her that there would be no wedding. First he and the steward got the four girls whom Guerra had married and then cast-off; together they all went up to Rosella's. In twenty minutes these four had convinced the weeping girl that she had indeed had a fortunate escape.

"But where is Captain Guerra now?" she asked as, a little later, the Sea Fox put her in a canoe to go aboard.

"I don't know, Rosella," he answered gently. "Nobody knows where he's gone. An' that's no lie, either," he added under his breath.

As the last canoe-load of slaves left the shore and Cap'n Pepper was stepping into another canoe to go aboard, he was held up by a group of captains.

"We've sent you off a half-dozen cases of wine as a little token of our regard, Captain Pepper," their spokesman, the Britisher, informed him. "And we are wondering if you would mind telling us whether you originated that trick you used to get Guerra or did you learn it from someone?"

"Gentlemen," returned the Sea Fox earnestly. "I, l'arned that trick from a better man than I ever will be, no other than Jim Bowie himself. He give me that tip one night when him an' his brother Resin stopped overnight at my father's farm. I was a lad at the time. Well, the jug of applejack got to circulatin' pretty freely an' when the talk switched roun' to the subject o' duels, Jim got down on the kitchen floor an' showed us how he got a man once jest the same way as ye see me get Guerra today."

He stepped into the canoe.

"But," he added, "I wouldn't advise nobody to try it unless they was pretty sure o' their legs an' had practised some little bit on a dummy. Good-by, gentlemen, an' thank ye most heartily for yer present."

OUR INDIAN POPULATION

ONE often reads in the public press statements emanating from official sources that our Indians are not only holding their own in the matter of population, but that they are actually increasing. Indeed, an announcement was made recently by the Secretary of the Interior that there are now as many Indians in the United States as there were at the time of Columbus, the number given being 346,962 who maintain tribal relations, besides about 60,000 who have abandoned those relations and mingled with the general population.

Now, as a matter of fact, a very careful comparative study of the population of the Indians of the United States at the time the first whites appeared among them, based on all available sources of information given by early explorers, travelers, and colonists, gives an aggregate of 846,000, an estimate not more than about 10 per cent. out of the way, or half a million more than the figures compiled by the Indian Office for the present population. But even this count is far from accurate, because it includes as "Indians" 23,405 negroes and 2,582 whites among the Five Civilized Tribes of Oklahoma, 1,888 mongrels in Virginia and Louisiana, 9,368 mongrels (largely negro) in North Carolina, to say nothing of the thousands of others enrolled as Indians but who have only a trace of aboriginal American blood. Even the Indian Office in 1923 admitted that fewer than half of the total Indian population was of full blood, and if the proportion were determined by anthropological methods instead of by rule-of-thumb, we would find that a very large proportion of the so-called full-bloods are mixed.

We scarcely need go farther to disprove the statements of the present number of the Indians compared with that of three to four centuries ago; but to make the story more complete, it may be well to weigh the dreadful results of the introduction of intoxicants and of the diseases of "civilization"—smallpox, measles, tuberculosis, syphilis, which have carried off untold thousands. A single epidemic of smallpox in 1837–38, introduced by the whites on the upper Missouri, wiped out half of all the tribes of the Northern plains, and this was the third plague from which they had suffered in a little more than half a century. A few years before, a visitation of disease in California reduced the Indian population of that state by 70,000, or more than five times the number of Indians in the Golden State to-day, including all degrees of admixture.

It is a historical fact that at the beginning of the Mission period in the eighteenth century the Indian population of California aggregated 250,000 or only about 100,000 less than the total number for the entire country at the time of the discovery—according to official guesswork, or propaganda, or whatever it may be. And still we have not accounted for the former 40,000 Indians of Texas, reduced to 2,500 in Oklahoma, the 9,000 in Virginia in Captain John Smith's day, now represented by 822 mongrels, the 20,000 natives of Florida, now entirely extinct—and the teeming thousands which once inhabited the Atlantic littoral and the Middle West, reduced to a pitiful handful wherever any of the tribes survive at all. Instead of equaling the population at the period of the discovery, we may be assured that the present full-blood Indians do not exceed fifteen or twenty per cent of the population of that early time.—F. W. H.

ST. AUGUSTINE

THE BEGINNINGS OF OUR TOWNS

By Eugene Cunningham

Endorsed by the St. Augustine Chamber of Commerce

AFTER the landing of Ponce de Leon in the year 1513, Florida was visited by Spanish, French, and English captains, but no attempt was made to do more than locate the rich Indian cities thought to be hidden in its deep forests. In the religious strife then rending France the Huguenot cause was desperate. Admiral Coligni, the Huguenot chief, sought a refuge for the persecuted Protestants. He sent an expedition to "Florida" and in 1562 Fort Charles was built near the present Port Royal, South Carolina.

Charles of France was no friend of Lutherans. Two years passed before Coligni could send another expedition under Laudonnere and the French found Fort Charles abandoned. Laudonnere returned to Florida and on the St. Johns River built Fort Carolus.

Meanwhile the activities of Coligni, as he collected ships and men to send to Laudonnere's support, were marked by the Huguenots' enemies. Word soon came to Spain that Ribault with six hundred Frenchmen was going to reinforce Laudonnere. King Philip entrusted the matter to Pedro Menendez de Aviles, who hated a trespasser and a Lutheran as bitterly as did his monarch. All these new lands had been granted to Spain by the pope, and the Spanish regarded the grant seriously.

In Cadiz, in 1565, Menendez gathered thirty-four ships and three thousand men, to destroy Ribault and Laudonnere. But a storm outside the harbor scattered the Spanish armada, leaving Menendez only six ships. He was so delayed that Ribault reached Florida safely. Having intercepted vessels bearing despatches to Menendez, the French captain was warned of the Spanish wrath.

On August 28, 1565, St. Augustine's Day, Menendez reached the Florida coast. The French ships ran out to sea and escaped the Spaniards. Menendez gave up the pursuit and came back to land and built a town, naming it St. Augustine. By his contract with King Philip, he was authorized to bring African slaves to Florida. So, by Spanish hands, at this time and place, slavery came to America.

The French force was divided, Laudonnere commanding Fort Carolus, while Ribault sailed his fleet downcoast to attack Menendez. A fierce gale scattered and wrecked the French ships and Menendez, observing this from the beach, hurried overland to capture Fort Carolus, fifty miles away. Laudonnere and only twenty men escaped, to win safely back to France in a small vessel. All the other Frenchmen were either killed or hung to trees.

The survivors of Ribault's wrecked ships made two separate parties. One, of two hundred and eight men, surrended to Menendez. Two hundred were slaughtered. Ribault, with a hundred and fifty of his immediate following, being in no position to resist, next surrendered. All were murdered, though Menendez had pledged their lives. The two hundred Frenchmen remaining, who had refused to surrender with Ribault and later fought the Spanish, finally yielded and for some reason Menendez kept his pledge to spare them.

Word of the Spaniard's barbarities horrified France, though King Charles seems not to have been greatly moved. Three years later a Huguenot soldier of fortune, De Gourges, determined to avenge his countrymen. He gathered a force, ostensibly to go buccaneering, but instead came quietly to Florida. Here, with the aid of those Indians who had been Laudonnere's friends, who hated their Spanish oppressors, De Bourges captured the Spanish outlying forts, taking bloody vengeance for Menendez's treachery and cruelty. He had too few men to capture St. Augustine itself, or to hold Florida, and had intended merely a reminder that the French would exact punishment for Spanish outrages.

So St. Augustine remained in Spanish hands, to become headquarters for the priests bent on proselyting the neighboring Indians. Sir Francis Drake burned the town in 1586; it was plundered by Captain Davis, an English buccaneer, in 1665. Other, unsuccessful, attacks were made upon it in later years. Altogether, the "oldest Caucasian town in America" had a bloody beginning and has had an eventful history. But founded as it was, as a mere side-issue to the real business of ejecting insolent trespassers from Spanish land, it has never been abandoned.

THE BETTER BREED

By EDWARD PARRISH WARE

Into the Sunken Land country of Arkansas came the sturdy wagon trains with the settlers and their families; but Tyronzy Brant, the swamp-rat, vowed they should not stay and relied upon his rifle to turn back the pioneer stream

I

TYRONZY BRANT, called the Deer-killer, poled his dugout up Ten Mile Slough until he came to a point midway of Buck Island, where river-grass and flags, taller than a man's head, grew well out in the water. Holding his boat against the sluggish current by thrusting the blade of his eight-foot paddle down into the bottom of the stream, he searched the fringe of weeds with keen eyes; then, having selected a spot where the growth was thinner than elsewhere, he drove the nose of his shell against it, and crossed into the still waters of a little cove. In front of him loomed Buck Island, heavily timbered, ten miles long and two miles wide.

"Good!" he exclaimed, as he marked a spot where two dugouts lay half out of the water. "The bateau is gone—Noay is away from home!"

He poled his own craft down the cove and hid it in a bunch of flags. A few moments he sat there, brow knitted in thought.

"Better make sho' though," he told himself, finally. "He might be thar an' a feller kaint be too keerful!"

Thrusting an arm through the strap of his long-barreled rifle—a single-shot, breech-loading gun of .38 caliber—the Deer-killer struck off through the undergrowth of hazel and huckleberry thickets, and, a few minutes later, entered a trail which led toward the center of the island. Proceeding noiselessly, he reached, after fifteen minutes' walking, a little clearing in the heart of the timber. At its edge he stopped and concealed himself behind a giant black-oak tree.

In the middle of the clearing stood a two-room log cabin, chinked with mud and almost entirely overrun with wild vines, which grew up between the logs of the raft that formed the cabin's foundation. Stretched between trees, here and there, were many newly-tarred nets, ready-to-hand for the fall fishing, while from the low limbs of half a dozen trees hung bunches of steel-traps, fresh from a soaking in

coon-grease. In front of the cabin's door, on trestles of rustic construction, half of a gum log, split lengthwise, was in the process of becoming a dugout; an array of long-handled ash paddles were seasoning in the shade of a big black-gum.

The place was the home of Noah Sutfin, a "swamp rat," so-called, who fished and trapped for a living, and spent his leisure hours pouring over the Bible, "Pilgrim's Progress," and such other religious books as he was able to obtain. Noah, unable to read writing, could, as he expressed it, "read readin', if the letters air big, an' the words ain't." On Sundays he read the scriptures and preached to those natives who cared to visit Buck Island and hear. It was the only place of religious worship that region of the swamp contained. Companioned by his daughter, Rowena, a girl of nineteen and the only member of his family the malarial fever had spared to him, Noah maintained a solitary residence upon the island, which his prestige among the swamp folk had enabled him to keep in its entirety.

For full five minutes Brant stood behind the tree without moving, his black eyes, deep-set under heavy brows, fixed upon the clearing; then he took a hollow block of bass-wood from the pocket of his deer-skin shirt and, removing the oblong piece of slate it contained, withdrew into the brush that fringed the place. Gently he stroked the thin edge of the hollow block with the bit of slate, and the keenest of ears would have been fooled into thinking that a turkey hen was in the brush, calling to her mate. Again and again Tyronzy called, his eyes all the while upon the clearing, lithe body poised in readiness for a swift retreat. Finally, satisfied that Sutfin was not at home, he restored the turkey-caller and dropped back into the timber again.

"Ol' Sut ain't at home, else he'd 'a' come out fo' that tu'key, sho'," chuckled the Deer-killer, as he struck off on a course which would take him below the clearing and across the island.

As he neared the shore-line, coming into a bit of marsh, studded with cypress-knees and dwarf willows, he unslung the rifle from his shoulder, and thereafter picked his way with extreme caution. At length he reached the western side of the island, and, parting a screen of river-grass and flags, peered out over the main channel of the St. Francis River.

Straight across the crystal water, topping a low donick some two hundred yards away, stood a new, double-log cabin. Smoke arose from its stick-and-mud chimney, and a freshly-cut rick of firewood stood beside the stump on which, as a tree, it had lately grown. Two children, a boy and a girl, played about the door-log; chickens picked in the short grass at the river's edge, and, somewhere near, oxen lowed.

IT WAS the cabin of a settler—there could be no mistaking it; in its very construction, one-and-a-half stories high, massively solid, roomy, fitted with glass windows, one could read this declaration: "I have come to stay!"

Tyronzy Brant's face, weather-tanned and seamed until it looked far older than its owner's twenty-five years, grew darker still when he saw the cabin, although it was not the first time he had stood in that spot and looked across at it. He waited, unmoving, alert. Presently the sun dropped behind the trees, and the forest grew dim. Over at the settler's house a woman stood in the door and blew a long blast on a cow's horn.

"Supper time!" muttered the hidden man. "It won't be long, now!"

When the horn sounded, two half-grown boys left the wood on the down-stream side of the clearing and raced each other toward the kitchen door. At sight of them Tyronzy Brant's rifle came up to his lean hip. He waited.

From the same direction, but moving more dignifiedly, came a stalwart, bearded man, carrying a broad-bladed brush-knife in his hand. He walked with the light tread of a woodsman, but there was also something in his bearing that hinted of the corn field, of cultivated places.

The two small children had scuttled for the house the moment the blast of the horn broke the stillness, leaving the clearing empty; after the older boys had raced inside, the bearded man went slowly to the door, then paused a moment to hang his brush-knife upon a hook imbedded in a log.

Brant, crouching forward, lips shut in a tight, grim line, brought his rifle to his shoulder, glanced for the fraction of an instant down its long barrel, and touched the hair-trigger. There was a reverberating roar, and a spurt of yellow flame flashed against the green of the woodland.

The giant form of the man across the

river jerked convulsively at the sound of the report, sagged against the wall of the cabin, hands clutching at the rough logs—then dropped heavily upon the step of his door.

The Deer-killer, scarcely waiting to note the effect of his shot, so deadly true he knew his aim to be, slid swiftly back into the heavy timber.

"The damned squatter!" he muttered through clenched teeth, as he removed the exploded shell and thrust it into a pocket of his pants. "Them as won't take no warnin' has to pay! An' he kaint say he wa'n't warned!"

Skirting the lower edge of the clearing, fearful that Sutfin might have returned, and that his dogs, always companions of their master, might scent him, Brant retraced his way through the underbrush and reached the place where he had left his dugout. As he was about to launch it, he heard voices and dropped instantly to cover in the grass.

Presently a batteau nosed its way through the screen of flags and slid smoothly into the cove. Standing on the stern-seat of the boat, lazily poling with a long paddle, was a tall man, sinewy, and with an air of ruddy good-health about him. His hair, snow white, was fine and wavy, and fell almost to his shoulders, framing a seamed face of singular intelligence. A mustache and cropped beard, almost as white as the hair, concealed the lower part of his face. His dress was of a pattern commonly worn by the natives of the region. Trousers of heavy blue jeans, wrapped from knee to ankle with strips of deer-skin, the latter forming a loop under the soles of light, but strongly-made, Congress gaiters; a gray woolen shirt, open at the throat, and a black slouch-brimmed hat, formed the visible portion of his garb—unless one counted the belt of tanned deer-hide about his middle, and the long, keen hunting-knife in the sheath it supported.

In the bow of the boat, as though acting as pilot, a lean black-and-tan hound, battle-scarred from many fights with coons and other varmints, reared his muzzle and sniffed the air; a low growl sounded in his throat. Brant crouched lower in his place of concealment; luckily for him, he had the wind of the dog.

On a seat athwart the boat, facing the man, sat a young girl. Her dress was almost a replica of her companion's, except that her close-cropped, wavy, brown hair was free from covering of any kind, and no hunting knife adorned her slim, belted waist. One might have taken her to be a boy, had it not been for the fineness of her features and the easy grace of her poise.

"Down, Bugler!" the girl ordered, reaching for the hound's collar with a small, brown hand. "Yo' only think yo' scents somethin'!"

Her voice was clear and musical; uncultured though it was, there was something compelling in the soft, slurring accent.

"Bugler probably scents a va'mint of some kind, down the sho' a bit," Noah Sutfin remarked. "They's thicker this fall than I ever seed 'em afo', on the St. Francis. Mink, mus'rat, coon, otter—all of 'em. Ought to be a fine year fo' furs."

"That'll tickle Tyronzy Brant 'most to death, won't it, Pappy?" the girl commented.

"Yes. If Tyronzy sticks closer to his trap-line, 'stead of spendin' so much time at McFall's Bar, down in Ma'ked Tree, he'll have a right sizeable sto' of money, come spring."

Sutfin shouldered his rifle and stepped ashore. The hound, no longer scenting the hidden man, trotted off over the path leading inland, and the girl and her father followed.

"Yo' ain't seed Tyronzy lately, have yo'?" Noah queried.

"No!" The girl seemed surprised at the question. "I haven't been off the islan' in a coon's age, except with yo'. An' he don't come here no mo', not since yo' tole him to stay away or yo'd slit——"

The rest of the answer was lost to the hidden listener, but he had no need of hearing it. When the sound of footsteps could no longer be heard, he left the cove and headed down the slough, poling furiously in the semi-darkness.

"Warn me off the islan', will yo', Noah Sutfin!" he grittted as he bent to his work. "Tell me yo' aims to slit my throat with yo' huntin' knife! Take sides with the damn squatters, an' agin' yo' own kind! Well, we'll see who gits somethin' done to they throat, when the time comes. You'll find it ain't safe to buck Tyronzy Brant!"

The Deer-killer, under the stimulus of hot anger, sped toward the foot of the island, where he meant to enter the St. Francis by way of the cut-off which reunited Ten Mile Slough with the parent stream.

Behind him was one man whom his ire had struck down, and another yet stood upon his feet whom he hated with all the intense, unreasoning venom of his breed.

II

TYRONZY BRANT was a product of the Sunken Land country. He was a true type of the swamp rat, contemptuously called so by those who dwelt outside; in the fastnesses of the wilderness, along the bayous and the sloughs, were many others of his kind.

In the fall of the year 1885, Brant, then twenty-five years old, was different in no essential from his grandfather, who fled to the swamp during the period that witnessed the Mexican War. He took his wife inside with him, and what it was he sought sanctuary from was never known. Many men reached that region unobtrusively and remained silent about their former lives. It made no difference. There was room enough for all. A man's background belonged to himself—to his memory.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the year 1811, to be exact, Nature, in a destructive mood, created the vast, bowl-like sink which occupies part of the northeastern corner of Arkansas. Although heavily timbered with perhaps the finest growth of hard-wood trees to be found in America, lumbering was impossible because of the swampy character of the ground, and the many fissures left in the face of the earth by the shock of its sinking. Those fissures, flooded each spring by the overflow waters of the Mississippi River, which marks the tract's eastern boundary, presently became bayous and sloughs, almost countless in number. Those sloughs, nearly without exception, bear their waters inland to where the St. Francis River, like a long silver knife, cleaves the heart of the swamp from end to end.

At the mouth of Cypress Slough, where it enters the river just four miles above the head of Buck Island, the first Brant erected a cabin upon stilts, rendering it safe from floods, except when the water was unusually high. There Tyronzy's father was born—and died, without ever going outside his native swamp. Tyronzy, the last of his line, knew but little more than his father about the world outside. In a vague way he was aware that beyond the timber-line there was a world many, many times bigger than anything he could think of; it was peopled by a race unlike himself—a conceited, selfish, hard people, who would take his hunting ground away, if they could have their will about it. There his knowledge ceased, nor did he thirst for more. That world was not his; let those who cared for it and wanted it, have it.

But let them bear this in mind: he and his race were in possession of the world they wanted—a wide, swampy waste which no one, other than trappers and hunters, could possibly use. Government, apparently, had forgotten it. It was no-man's land, free for the taking, and it had been taken. It would be held, if powder and bullets could hold it.

"Squatter's rights!" he blazed, pausing in his stroke, the better to vent his spleen. "They aim to sneak inside, an' squat down on any land they fancies. Then, when it is opened fo' homesteadin', if it ever is, they'll have fust call to enter it up on the books fo' their own! It ain't theirs—it ain't nobody's but ours! An' they sha'n't steal it! They sha'n't!"

Hiram Colby, from the plains of Illinois, had come into the Buck Island region early in the summer, and had been warned to leave, time and again. Brant, a leader among his people, had told him to go. But Hiram Colby was made of pioneer stuff; he merely shook his head and stayed on. So he had to pay.

The Deer-killer felt not the least compunction over what he had just done, nor did he fear punishment for it. The law seldom penetrated north of Marked Tree, the frontier timber-town on the new railway, the first belt of steel to touch the swamp. The town, built high on piling, was the headquarters of the lumberjacks who logged the L'Anguile Bayou wilderness; that bit of the Sunken Land country is slightly higher than the vaster portion, and had lately been, in a measure, reclaimed. The swamp rats, from the upper reaches of the St. Francis, did their trading there. Brant hated the lumberjacks only slightly less than he did the settlers.

"They'll fight, them tree-cutters will—leastways, they does when they's full of whisky," he would say. "But the squatters, damn 'em, they won't neither fight ner tetch likker. They ain't fitten fo' nuthin'!"

The dugout glided through a ribbon-like cut-off, which drew the waters off a wide, grass-grown marsh and entered the St. Francis south of the foot of Buck Island. Three miles distant the Deer-killer approached the only cleared land of any appreciable extent to be found on the stream. There, for a distance of four miles, the

river winds across a low, level plain, barren of growth other than swamp-grass and, here and there, clumps of stunted willows.

As he entered the plain from timber-line, a sight greeted the Deer-killer's eyes which caused him to hold his paddle in mid-air while he sat down slowly in the stern-seat, incredulity written upon his face.

S FAR as he could see, following the line of the river across the plain, campfires dotted the earth; illuminating the sky with ruddy tints. There were at least two dozen camps, all in a line along the river's low bank.

As the significance of that scene dawned upon him, Brant's lids narrowed to slits through which his eyes glowed fiercely, the fire-light causing them to shine like the eyes of a treed panther. With a powerful sweep of his paddle, he shot the light shell onward and leaped ashore at the nearest fire. For a long moment he surveyed the picture before him.

A line of covered wagons, spaced about one hundred feet apart, stretched away until they became only vague shapes in the shadowy light. All about them was activity. Women bent above cooking-fires; men brought water from the river, herded oxen out into the taller grass of the plain, and busied themselves at various of the heavier tasks, calling to and fro to each other in high good-humor. Children and dogs intermingled in play. An odor of steaming coffee, and frying smoked-meat, filled the air. It was an engaging scene—and one of great portent.

The Deer-killer looked longest at the dogs; they were a breed quite new to him. Rangy and powerful, they were, and covered with coats of coarse, shaggy hair. He had never seen their kind before; they were not real dogs, like his own sleek, black-and-tan hounds at home, he thought. They looked more like wolves.

"Gawd!" the stricken swamp-man cried. "I'd ruther've died than live to see sich a sight!"

The fires of hell, itself, would not have seemed more evil in his eyes. He stalked toward the nearest camp, and, when he came within the circle of the fire-light, a lank man, dressed in a cotton-check shirt and blue jean trousers, the bottoms of which were wrinkled about the tops of cowhide boots, advanced to meet him. His eyes were friendly, and his voice hearty.

"Come right up, stranger!" he greeted. "You're just in time for supper—and you're as welcome as a stiff breeze in horse-fly time!"

Brant leaned upon his grounded rifle, eyes drinking in the unaccustomed scene.

"Seems lak there's a right smart passel of yo' hereabouts," he commented, after a moment. "Air yo' goin' far?"

The lank man pulled a twist of tobacco from his hip pocket, and proffered it hospitably. But Tyronzy saw it not.

"Yes," replied the camper, biting off a chew. "There's twenty families of us, all told; and I guess we are about at our journey's end. For which the good Lord be thanked," he finished devoutly.

"Amen!" cried the cotton-frocked, angular woman who was turning bacon at the fire. "We've come through under the Lord's own hand!"

"All praise to Him!"

A tall girl, with heavy, black braids wound round her head, dark eyes sparkling in the fire-light, and cheeks glowing with health, came up from the river in time to add her meed of thanksgiving to that of her mother. She nodded friendlily to the strange man.

"Wharabouts does yo' aim fo' yo' journey to end?" demanded Tyronzy, paying no attention to the girl.

"Up in the Buck Island neighborhood," the man informed him. "There we aim to stop."

Tyronzy trembled, and his lean fingers gripped the barrel of his rifle until they ached.

"Squattin'?" The word, in the Deer-killer's mouth, was an epithet, an insult.

"We-el, yes," drawled the camper, sensing something of the hostility in the Deer-killer's attitude. "I guess that's about the size of it. We aim to homestead, in time."

"The time ain't never comin'!" cried the Deer-killer sternly. "If I war givin' out advice, an' yo' war takin' of it, yo'd yoke up yo' cattle an' drive outten here, back to whar yo' come from! An' yo'd not let the grass git no higher under yo' wheels!"

The camper turned stern eyes upon him, face no longer friendly, lips grim and straight.

"What do you mean by that?" he drawled. "Are you threatening me?"

"I means that it is a big world, so they tells me, an' thar's land fo' them as wants land—out yonder!" Brant cried, indicating

with a wide gesture the far outside. "Thar's plenty of room fo' them as wants to grow co'n an' raise hawgs—out thar! In here," turning, he pointed toward the dark swamp, "thar's water fo' them as wants water, an' plenty of deers, an' minks, an' feesh, fo' them as wants to hunt an' trap." The Deer-killer paused, giving his next words all the weight he could. "Now, we ain't never pestered yo' nor yo' land; why kain't yo' leave our water alone? Why kain't them as wants land have land, and them as wants water, have water?"

As Tyronzy Brant finished summing up the situation, as he saw it, a young man of about his own age, tall, dressed in the rough garb of the trail but, unlike most of the men in the train, clean-shaven, came out of the shadow of the ox-wagon and confronted him. The two men eyed each other for a long moment.

"You seem to feel considerable resentment toward us folks, stranger," the newcomer drawled, after a moment, still holding Tyronzy's glance with his own. "What might your objection be to us?"

"I done stated it, jist now!"

"Such ignorance as you utter deserves no answer!" the young man exclaimed. "But it is going to get one—and the only kind it can understand: We are going to write the answer all over the land, and in words even you can read!"

Tyronzy, having had his say, and not knowing just how to answer the speaker, since he had only a faint comprehension of the meaning of his words, suddenly jerked his rifle into the crook of his arm and turned away.

"I done warned yo'," he called over his shoulder. "That's all I got to say!"

"Wait!" The young man called him back.

"Well?" queried Brant, turning back.

"Maybe you will be willing to give out some information, along with your advice, stranger," the young man went on, seeing that Brant waited. "Do you happen to know a man named Colby, in your neighborhood? Hiram Colby?"

The Deer-killer stiffened at sound of the name. For a moment, while his eyes searched the face of the man before him, he did not answer. When he did reply, his voice sounded hoarse, as though he suddenly had taken cold.

"I've seed him a time or two."

"I'm Amos Colby, his brother, stranger," the older man broke in, "and I'd be greatly obliged for news of him."

"Don't know nuthin' about him!" Tyronzy spat. "He's a damn squatter——"

"Hold on," cried the young man. "Shut your mouth on your words, stranger! You are damning a good man in the face of his son."

Fear was a strange emotion in the breast of Tyronzy Brant, but as he stood there looking into the stern, set face of the son of the man he had shot just two hours before, a chill shook him and his teeth chattered.

"Seem to be ailing, stranger," observed young Colby. "Are you sick?"

"Tain't nothin' but a chill," the Deer-killer gulped. "They's a powerful lot of mala'ia in the swamps, an' us as hasn't got it, gits it. I'll be all right, d'reckly."

He was as good as his word. The ague passed as suddenly as it had come.

"As fo' Hiram Colby," he said, at length, "his cabin is up-river about nine mile, on this side the stream——"

AT THAT moment the Deer-killer's keen ears caught the swish of a paddle out in the river, and he turned just as a dugout glided into the far-flung circle of firelight. The boat came to a stop, then swung inshore. A moment later Rowena Sutfin came across the grass toward the fire.

"Is—is they a doctor 'mongst all you folks?" she began, before she reached the fire.

Then she stopped suddenly, her slim, trousered figure sharply in relief against the darkness. She had recognized Tyronzy Brant.

"No, there ain't—" the elder Colby began.

"A doctor," interrupted the Deer-killer. "Who's needin' of a doctor at Buck Island?" he demanded. Then, before the girl could answer, he broke out again. "Whar at is yo' pappy, Roe Sutfin? Whut air yo' doin' down here by yo'se'f?"

"None of yo' bizness!" she flared. "But it ain't no secret; he's over at the squatter's house."

"The squatter——"

"Yes." Roe Sutfin's eyes shot fire as she looked at the Deer-killer with a level glance. "A man with the heart of a skunk, an' the prowlin' natur' of a wolf, drapped him with a bullet on his own do'-step two hours ago."

The settlers now crowded around the two, uneasiness in their glances.

"Who was shot?" asked young Colby, in deep anxiety.

"Nobody!" cried Brant. "The gal don't know whut she's talkin' abou——"

"Hiram Colby was shot today," the girl interrupted shrilly. "An' I'll thank yo', Tyronzy Brant, not to answer fo' me."

"My father!" cried Colby. "Is—is he—dead?"

"Yo' father?" the girl seemed conscious of the young man for the first time. "Yo' own pappy?"

"Yes. Is he dead?"

"No."

"Howcome he ain't—" Brant snapped his mouth shut, his wild eyes fixed incredulously upon those of the girl.

"'Twa'n't no fault of the skunk whut done the shootin'!" she blazed, facing him. "His aim war good enough." Then she turned in explanation to the settlers. "Mister Colby war carryin' a co'n knife in his hand; he started to hang it up by the do', when—spang! The bullet come across the river, an' swizzled agin' the blade——"

"God be praised!" cried Amos Colby.

The girl looked at him.

"Don't praise Him too quick," she admonished. "The squatter may die yet. The bullet went in an' broke his shoulder."

Brant, who had stood like a statue, unable to believe that Colby was not dead, now spoke.

"Whar at air yo' headed?"

"To Ma'ked Tree, after a doctor," she answered. "Pappy is doin' all he can to keep the life in the squatter—an' thar' wa'n't nobody else to go!"

Suddenly reminded that she had need to hurry, the girl started abruptly for the boat.

"Wait!" cried Brant, following her. "I'll git the doctor!"

"It's my place to go," exclaimed young Colby, suddenly rousing from the stupor into which the news had thrown him. "Will you take me?" he demanded of Tyronzy.

"I'll take yo'," Roe shouted from the river. "Hurry, an' don't lose no mo' time."

Colby stepped into the bow of her dugout, and she barely gave him time to seat himself ere swinging out into the current.

Brant ran for his boat, an oath on his lips.

"Take the paddle," the girl ordered, thrusting it into Colby's hand. Then, facing around, she lifted her father's rifle from the rack in the stern of the boat, and brought it up across her slim hip. "Stay whar yo' air, Tyronzy Brant!" she shouted. "If you come down in gunshot of me, I'll drap yo' into the river as sho' as my name is Roe Sutfin!"

And the Deer-killer, knowing the kind of stuff the swamp-girl was made of, swung about and headed up-stream into the darkness.

III

HIRAM COLBY'S recovery was slow. A spell of swamp-fever set in before the wound began to heal, keeping him in bed for a full month. The fever broken, he gradually mended, and got upon his feet again. If, during the long days he lay a-bed, he meditated upon vengeance against the man who had treacherously struck him down from cover, he kept such thoughts to himself. Frequently he held long conversations with young Jim, his son, in the sick-room, but their nature was not disclosed to the remaining members of the family, nor to their friends. That father and son understood each other and were in harmony concerning whatever action they planned, was evident, and, that being the case, the neighboring settlers kept out of it.

On the third day after the shooting, Noah Sutfin poled across from Buck Island to inquire about the injured man. He did not enter the house, so Jim stood in the yard and talked with him.

"I kain't say whut is goin' on in the minds of them as meditates violence tow'ads you-all, but I wants to say that I gua'antees, pussonally, they won't be no mo' shootin' from the cover of Buck Island," the old man said, just before taking his departure. "Relatin' to that, I gives yo' my word—and you air safe in takin' it."

Colby did not doubt it. By what means Sutfin would be able to make good his guarantee, the young settler did not, of course, know; but that the old swamper would do it, he believed.

There was something about the old islander that inspired confidence. He was not the kind of man who would shoot another from cover; that was clear. It would have been absurd to suspect him. He had warned Hiram Colby, in a friendly way, when the latter first came in, that he might as well prepare for trouble. When called upon for aid, the night of the shooting, he had responded instantly, and there was no doubting the sincerity of his sympathy.

Noah did not call again, and the girl came not at all. Jim had not seen her since the night she paddled him so rapidly down the river and back again, her dugout additionally laden on the return trip, a feat he had not ceased to marvel at. Roe Sutfin, though, seemed to regard the performance as wholly usual and accepted his thanks shyly. She disappeared shortly after bringing the physician and did not return.

Young Colby staked off a quarter-section of land adjoining his father's on the north, but did not begin improving it. Being unmarried, he had no immediate need of a separate dwelling, while his time could be well employed on Hiram's place. He assisted his fellows, all of whom staked land in the vicinity of Colby's, in the building of their cabins. Among the settlers, Jim was unquestionably regarded as a leader. His advice was asked by all, and he was kept fairly busy in the interests of others.

Before the wagon-train had departed from Illinois, Jim had argued in favor of the use of ox-teams, rather than mules. His judgment had proven good. In swampy ground the small hoofs, characteristic of the mule, would cut the soil and mire him down in places where the wide, split foot of an ox enabled him to cross without difficulty.

Acting upon Jim's advice, all built cabins after the model Hiram Colby had followed in his: a double-log house, having two large rooms opening into each other, with a lean-to, or shed, across the back. The lean-to served as kitchen and dining-room. The most important feature, however—and one that Jim insisted upon—was the half-story above the two main rooms, reached by means of a ladder from those below. In case of a flood, the family could take refuge in the upper story, and be safe.

Flood-waters, in the Sunken Land country, never come swiftly; there occurs a gradual "rise" of the St. Francis, which swells in volume because of the water brought to it by its innumerable tributaries and the "back-water" of the Mississippi. When flood-stage is reached, the water flows gradually out over the swamp, covering it. A well-built house, on good log foundations, is in no danger of being washed away.

There had been very little high-water during the past two years, but that it would come again and again was certain. The Mississippi, in a measure restrained by levees, was not by any means tamed. That it would break through and inundate the swamp, time after time, was to be expected. That was a chance the settlers had to take; but at no distant time the great river would be conquered, and the end they had in view was worth the present risk.

There was a significant difference between the solid structures of the newcomers, and the makeshift "stilt" and "raft" cabins of the natives, but it is to be doubted that any of the latter saw it understandingly, save only Noah Sutfin, and he wisely made no comment about it.

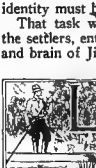
Tyronzy Brant, although not exactly in hiding, gave the Buck Island region a wide berth—as did all the swamp men, for that matter. Not one had been seen in the main channel of the St. Francis, from the head of the island to its foot, since the settlers came in. The west bank of the river had, to all appearances, been yielded to them.

But that did not fool anyone. The settlers knew that, sooner or later, a test of strength would come: native against squatter.

No direct evidence named the Deer-killer as the would-be assassin of Colby, nor did any voice publicly accuse him; but it was generally believed that he had fired the shot. So far as surface indications went, no investigation of the matter was in progress upon the part of the settlers. It was, apparently, a closed incident.

The seeming indifference concerning the shooting of Colby was only seeming. Both Jim and Hiram were much concerned about it, but their concern related to the future. What had happened yesterday might be repeated tomorrow; what had occurred to one man might occur to others, in their exposed positions along the river's edge. Noah Sutfin's guarantee was worth much, in the opinion of both the Colby's; but he was, after all, not all-powerful. Besides, the country in general must be made safe. The would-be killer's identity must be fixed.

That task was, by common consent of the settlers, entrusted to the capable hands and brain of Jim Colby.



LATE in November, Jim, who had learned to handle the native dugout, poled across the river and went ashore on Buck Island. It was his second trip to the place, the first occurring shortly after his arrival in the country. On that first

trip, keeping in mind the position his father was in when the bullet struck him, he had been able to determine the probable location of the rifleman when he fired. He then searched the shoreline carefully; that he would not find footprints, he knew; the character of the soil would not permit them to lie long a-ground.

Nevertheless, he found the place where Tyronzy Brant had crouched: a few tell-tale bits of broken foliage, caught in the mire in a spot where he thought they were likely to be, was all. But it was sufficient. Of course, an animal, going down to drink, might have broken the foliage; but there was evidence to the contrary.

Jim had dug out of the mire, where it had evidently been trampled, a queer, man-made contrivance, the like of which he had not seen before. But, because it was man-made, and had clearly not been in the wet ground long, he regarded the find as conclusive proof that he stood in the place where the hidden man had been. It remained for him to find out who had lost the thing; then he would know who shot his father.

His second trip was for the sole purpose of learning the identity of the owner of the unusual contrivance; he carried it with him.

Frost had killed the foliage, and the loamy soil of the island was acquiring another stratum of wealth in the form of fallen leaves, when Jim went ashore in November. Striking a course which he thought would take him across the trackless wilderness and to the island's center, he let his imagination have free rein.

The trees on Buck Island vanished, and great fields of corn shot up from the soil, which was richer than any his feet had trod before. He visioned all of the great Sunken Land country flowering under the hand of man, instead of in its present wild state, knowing no control other than that of Nature. A great country, a rich . . .

Just ahead of him hounds gave tongue, and his vision ended abruptly. The forest, with its mysteries and its dangers, closed in about him. His glance ranged ahead.

Noah Sutfin leaned against a big gum tree, ancient but none the less deadly, rifle under arm, some twenty feet away. How the old man had divined his presence on the island, intercepting him before he had gotten well started, Jim could only guess. He hesitated, then went on.

The dogs appeared to take a cue from their master; they were neither friendly nor unfriendly; merely watchful.

"Goin' to have a spell of weather, if we ain't keerful." Noah spoke as Jim approached. His eyes were raised to the clouds which showed leaden above the trees.

"Them clouds looks lak they might have snow in 'em, an' it's gittin' along about time for it," he went on.

"Wouldn't be at all surprised," Jim agreed. "There's a sharp tang in the air these mornings."

"Goin' to be an early winter," the old man predicted. "My ol' hawgs is bringin' up leaves for they beds, already. Right smart of cold an' fallin' weather, too, I figgers. The squir'ls is busy as all git-out, getherin' up aco'ns an', hick'ry nuts."

"Yes. I noticed that as I came along," Jim corroborated. He, too, leaned against a tree, his rifle grounded.

"Never in all my days has I seed the hulls aroun' the hazel-nuts as thick as they is this fall. Means a hard winter, sho'."

"Ought to suit you trappers fine," Jim offered. "Cold weather makes fine fur."

Noah transferred his glance from the clouds to Colby's rifle. He indicated the gun by a nod of his head.

"Right fine lookin' gun you got thar," he commented.

"Yes. It's the new magazine rifle—repeater. Take a look at it," he offered, presenting it.

The old man drew back, a frown on his brow. He motioned Jim away.

"That's somethin' I wouldn't 'low no man to do, young Colby," he exclaimed sternly. "I wouldn't let no man take my gun an' leave me helpless befo' his own. An'," he went on, his eyes level now with the settler's, "if I was in yo' shoes, I'd not offer to do it ag'in. It might not be safe—with others than me."

Offended at first, Colby now knew that he was receiving good advice, and he took it in kind.

"I'm learning from you, Mr. Sutfin, and I thank you," he said simply.

"Reckon Noah is good enough. Folks don't mister other folks much around here."

"Lesson number two," Jim grinned.

"Reckon thar ain't much a' ol' swamp-rat like me can l'arn sich as you," Noah said, in evident good faith. "But they's always a few things about a new country that a fresh comer needs to know." He hesitated, then went on. "About the rifle now—that's important."

Jim was about to reply, stating the rea-

son for his being on the island, when the old man shouldered his gun and started away.

"You was on yo' way to my cabin," he said. "So we'll jist git along."

Colby fell in behind, and a few minutes later they reached the clearing. Noah motioned the young man to a seat upon a log before the house, and sat down on the edge of the raft which was, in time of high-water, his means of riding-out the flood.

"Now, young Colby," he invited. "Say yo' say."

Jim took a small, hollow block of basswood from a pocket, and proffered it to Sutfin.

"Can you tell me what that thing is?" he asked.

Noah took it from him. "Where did you git it from?" he queried, turning it over and taking a bit of slate from the hollow.

"Found it on the island, about two weeks ago," Colby replied. "It has been in the ground, as you can see. I don't know what it is, nor do I recognize the kind of wood it's made of."

"Bass-wood," Noah supplied, shortly. "It's a contraption some amongst the swamp folks uses to call tu'keys with."

He applied the bits of slate to the thin edge of the block and gave a perfect call, while Jim grinned in appreciation.

"Pussonly, I prefers the wing-bone of a tu'key, itse'f, to call with," Noah explained. "An' so does most of the folks hereabouts."

Jim's face grew serious.

"Not many like that around here, then?" he asked.

"Not many. Still, they's a scatterin' of 'em, here an' thar."

"Does Tyronzy Brant use one?"

The question came suddenly, but the face of the old man remained perfectly calm. If he was startled, he did not betray it by so much as the quivering of an eyelid. Seemingly, there was something in the tree-top, back of Jim, which interested him deeply.

HE silence was broken by a slight noise in the cabin, causing Colby's glance to shift from Noah's face to the doorway.

Roe Sutfin stood there, looking at him, and there was an unmistakable something in her manner which told Jim, as plainly as words, not to betray her presence to her father.

It was the first time he had seen her in daylight. He noticed that her eyes were brown, like oak-leaves after the frost has cured them, and not many shades darker than the smooth skin of her face. The color in her cheeks seemed not to overlay them, but to arise from beneath and diffuse itself just under the skin. There was nothing he could liken her lips to, since he had yet to see a swamp-grown red-haw in the glory of its maturity. The charm of her slender body, which had attracted him before, now grew upon him. Most of the women he knew were more ruggedly built. This girl was as willowy and slim as the stem of a may-apple plant, and as full of life and vigor.

Sutfin, in ignorance of the fact that Roe had come to the door, finally made answer.

"I'd ruther not answer that," he said, looking his questioner straight in the eyes. "Maybe it's jist as well fo' all concerned, fo' me not to."

Jim got up from his seat on the log, his eyes again finding the girl.

Roe's glance flashed toward her father and back to Colby; then she gave a quick, affirmative nod and slipped back into the cabin.

The question was answered.

The girl's action affected Colby strangely. His cheeks flushed, and he felt a queer sensation in the region of his heart. She had defied her father, unaware of it though he was—and she had done so for him, Jim Colby.

"I see your side of it," Jim said, after a moment. "You think that, as long as I don't know positively that Brant uses a caller like that, I can only suspect him. If you admit that he does, then, putting two and two together, I'll know for sure. I don't blame you, of course. You think I want to find the man who shot my father and shoot him in revenge for it. I don't. I wasn't raised that way. Two wrongs don't make a right, and never will. I only want to know who the man is, in order to guard against him. Violence can't be cured with violence; revenge hasn't got any right in the heart of a man."

Jim swung his rifle to his shoulder and crossed the clearing with swinging strides.

Noah sat on the raft, gazing after the settler until his tall figure no longer could be seen.

"'Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord,'" he murmured, getting to his feet. "An

He'll take it in His own time—an' in His own way."

IV

IM COLBY was not the only caller Buck Island had that day. An hour after the settler had gone, Noah, warned by his dogs that someone was approaching the cabin, stepped outside, just as Tyronzy Brant, accompanied by half a dozen swamp-men, entered the clearing from its east side. The old man stood upon the raft in front of his door and calmly awaited their coming.

The visitors halted about twenty feet from the cabin, and "Beeswax" Brown, the honey-gatherer, spoke. Ordinarily, Brant would have been in the position of leader, but this was no ordinary occasion.

"Noay," began the grizzled swamp-man, after a pause during which he seemed to expect the old fisherman to speak. "It's come to a sorry pass when yo' stand befo' the do' of yo' own house an' fail to make yo' neighbors welcome. We has come on business that won't bear no delay; an' yo' meet us in front of yo' cabin—silent."

Sutfin's glance went directly to Brant, and he indicated the Deer-killer by pointing toward him.

"Neighbors whut comes to see me in company with a man whut has been warned never to set foot on Buck Island ag'in, fo' good an' sufficient cause, kin expect to be treated lak that man is treated."

"Yo' warnin' of Tyronzy away from the islan' is one of the matters whut brings us here today," Beeswax stated. "We wants to know howcome yo' to do it."

"I don't make a practise of tellin' my reasons fo' doin' whut I does," said Noah, slowly. "But, as the matter may be said to tetch us all, you-all as well as me, I makes no objection."

Sutfin paused, and the swamp-men waited silently for him to continue.

"Neighbors," he resumed, his voice ringing, "I warned Tyronzy Brant to keep off Buck Island because I wanted to stop him from doin' the dirty, sneakin' thing he done in spite of me! I didn't want him to shoot the squatter from the cover of my woods. I ketched him, twice, prowlin' about on the west side, an' I told him then that I would slit his throat if ever he come her' ag'in—an', by Gawd, I will!"

As he ceased speaking, Noah, with the agility of a panther, leaped from the raft and, covering the few feet that separated him from the Deer-killer, had the point of his keen knife at the younger man's throat.

But it was not to be. Strong hands seized the islander, forcing him away from Tyronzy before he could finish the stroke he had started, while Cash Ripley, youngest and strongest of those present, wrenched the Deer-killer's rifle and knife from him.

"Shame! Shame on all of yo', comin' here to safegua'd a skunk whilst he does whut he wouldn't dare do by himse'f!" Roe Sutfin, her father's rifle in her hands, appeared upon the raft, hair tossing wildly and her eyes blazing.

"Shame on yo', Beeswax Brown, an' yo, Cash Ripley, an' Lafe Skeers—an' all the rest of yo'! Neighbors, yo' says; yo' is strange neighbors! Come here to aid an' gua'd Tyronzy Brant, which, lak a woolf, is afeered to travel by himse'f an' has to have his pack." She swung the rifle up across her hip, thumb curved over the hammer. "Stan' away from my pappy," she cried, "or I'll send at least one amongst yo' smack into hell!"

"Roe!" Noah spoke, pointing toward the door of the cabin.

The girl, knowing it to be a command, hesitated for an instant; then, tears of anger swimming in her eyes, she reluctantly retreated inside.

"The gal, here of late, don't know who's frien's an' who's foes," said Noah calmly, turning toward the men, who had retired a short distance while Roe upbraided them. "She has forgot that thar ain't a man amongst you, save one, whut would lift his han' agin' me in anger." It was the old man's apology, and, having made it, he turned to the business in hand. "We'll let the matter of the Deer-killer pass fo' the present," he said, "seein' we is both unarmed and the balance of yo-all is so dead set agin' trouble betwixt us. Yo' said, Beeswax, that yo' wanted to know whut made me warn Tyronzy from the islan'. Well, yo' know why, now. Whut war the other matter yo' had in mind?"

Beeswax cleared his throat. He was not entirely at ease.

"Howcome yo', Noay, to be sidin' with the squatters?"

Sutfin's figure stiffened.

"I ain't sidin' with 'em ner agin' 'em," he said. "We is all on Gove'ment land, an' you-all knows it! The folks up thar at Washin'ton ain't never interfered with us stayin' here, but they ain't neither tol' us that the country belongs to us. They

has kep' out of it, doin' nothin', an' we has come to think it is ours. But it ain't. An' as long as the Gove'ment don't up an say to the squatters, 'Yo' kain't go in thar an' squat,' we ain't got the right to do it—ner shoot 'em from cover when they does."

The swamp-men considered Noah's declaration in silence.

"You is willin', then, fo' outsiders to come in an' take the swamp away from us?" Brown said finally.

"I ain't neither willin' ner unwillin'; I am as helpless, either way, as if I hadn't been born," Noah told them. "Things is jist takin' the cou'se they is meant to take, an' you an' me ain't got nothin' to do with it. So I don't let myself git all het up about the squatters comin' in. I been expectin' 'em, all these years. Knowed they'd come, in time—an' they did!"

Brown drew his friends aside and they talked together for a moment. Tyronzy Brant, alone, remained aloof. He still stood with his back to the tree against which Noah's charge had thrust him, his eyes upon the doorway through which Roe Sutfin had disappeared.

"Yo' won't jine we-all, then, an' help drive the squatters outten the country?" Brown asked, returning.

"No," Sutfin replied. "An' I advises the rest of yo' to let 'em alone. Brother has shed the blood of brother, in plenty, as it is; they ain't no call fo' mo' to be spilt. A few mo' tricks lak the one the Deer-killer done, a month ago, an' they'll be them as has the right an' the power to punish, comin' in amongst us; an' we ain't big enough ner strong enough to stan' agin' 'em a single day. Better take heed of my words, an' let the squatters be."

"Whut can Gove'ment do to us, if it does come in here on the side of the squatters?" Cash Ripley spoke up, belligerently.

"I ain't swappin' words with yo', Cash," Noah said. I leave you to figger it out fo' yo'se'f."

The swamp-men drew apart again, speaking together in low voices. Presently Brown turned to Noah, and, offered his hand.

"We has knowed yo' all our lives, Noay Sutfin, an' none of us has ever knowed evil to come from yo'," he said. "We kain't help it if yo' sees things diff'runt from what we does; an' if our ways parts now for a while, it's only that they kin be jined up ag'in in better days. We knows yo' too well to believe that yo' will use what yo' knows now, or finds out later, to our hurt. I," he paused, his rough features betraying an emotion which passed quickly, "I reckon that s all. We jist wanted to know whar at yo stand."

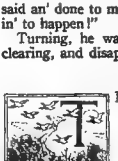
In silence, the two old friends shook hands; then, followed by his companions, Beeswax took his leave.

Tyronzy Brant, however, remained by the tree. When the group paused at the edge of the clearing, evidently awaiting him, he straightened himself and spoke.

"Noay Sutfin," he said, "yo' ain't tol' only one reason why yo' ordered me off the islan'. Yo' thinks I'm not good enough to be wed with Roe, an' you aims I sha'n't be. Ever since I has been big enough to know whut marryin' meant, I has figgered that she was goin' to be my woman. It is fitten she should be; I am the leader, here in the swamps, an' she is the gal of a man whut has always led—until he got too ol' to do it any mo'. Here of late, Roe has turned agin' me; she's all fo' the squatters. But hear me, an' believe whut I says: afore I'll see her wed with a settler, I'll see the waters of the St. Francis red with blood! They come in to take away the lan', an', not satisfied with that, they goes futher. One of 'em wants to take away the gal whut I loves—I does love her, Gawd knows I does, spite of whut she's said an' done to me. That ain't never goin' to happen!"

Turning, he walked swiftly across the clearing, and disappeared in the timber.

V



THE snow, predicted by Noah Sutfin, came in the second week of December, bringing with it such flocks of ducks as the settlers had never dreamed of; they swarmed like bees, and the slaughter, by native market-hunters, was tremendous.

The snow also marked the beginning of the trapping season, when great activity among the swamp people should have been in evidence. Instead, there was an ominous quiet.

One morning, in the latter part of the week of the snow, Jim Colby arose earlier than usual; he meant, that day, to have a try for a deer, they being plentiful in the region. Also, there were certain observations he desired to make concerning the character of part of the neighboring country, and they could be included in the activities of the hunting trip.

Just at daybreak, leaving Hiram's house

and going down the path toward the river, he came upon a deerskin game-bag, which lay about fifty feet below the cabin. It was not the property of anyone whom he knew and his suspicions were instantly aroused.

A block of wood fell out of the sack when he inverted it; evidently it had been placed inside to give weight to the bag, and Jim understood, at once, that it had been thrown ashore from the river. A square piece of manila wrapping-paper fell out, along with the block, and Colby deciphered the following message:

squatter git a move on yo an lite out befo crismas day, or you gits a presint yo wont forgit. las warnin.

Colby thrust the bit of paper into a pocket and took to the river, all thought of deer-hunting gone from his mind.

Heading up-stream, he struck out for the upper end of Buck Island. There were several things he meant to know before returning that night. The seriousness of the warning he had just received could not be over-stressed; the natives had been planning ways and means, and Jim knew they would strike soon—probably on the very day they had assigned in the note as being the limit of time left them. That the warning was meant for all the settlers, Jim, of course, knew. It behooved him, then, to set about developing a counter-action.

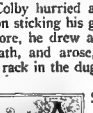
Directly above Buck Island, the St. Francis, coming in from the northeast in a wide curve, forks sharply and thereafter follows the west shore of the ten mile strip of land. The left fork, Ten Mile Slough, crosses a marsh when it leaves the main stream, and sets in almost directly southward, following the crescent of the island. That point, where the river forked, was the immediate object of Colby's attention.

Reaching the head of the island, he sat in his dugout and surveyed the lay of the land and water with his eyes. The reason the swamp-men had not frequented the river of late was now made clear: it had not been necessary to do so; they were using Ten Mile Slough in making trips up and down the country. That, while not of great importance, was nevertheless enlightening.

The sound of a pack of deer-hounds in full cry caused Jim to transfer his attention from the matter in hand and concentrate upon that which was going on in the forest, east of the slough. He knew that, in all probability, the deer would make for the island, losing the dogs by swimming across the water—unless, of course, the pack was too close upon it. The hounds came nearer, their baying announcing the fact that they were closing in on their quarry.

A large buck suddenly broke cover and ran down to the marshy shore of the slough, where it stopped for an instant to turn its great head and look back toward its pursuers. Seizing his rifle, Colby fired. The buck leaped high out of the water, came down upon its side, struggled to its feet again, then dropped and lay still.

Colby hurried across the slough, intent upon sticking his game. Running his boat ashore, he drew a hunting-knife from its sheath, and arose, leaving his rifle upon the rack in the dugout.



AS HE stepped out upon the ground, a voice called to him, in menacing tones, "Don't tetch it, squatter! If yo' do, I'll let the daylight through yo'!"

Glancing up quickly, Colby looked into the flaring eyes of the Deer-killer, whose rifle covered him.

"The advantage seems to be with you, right now, Brant," he said, calmly. "What are you going to do about it?"

Tyronzy came slowly toward the water, gun ready.

"I ain't goin' to 'low no man to steal my game," he exclaimed.

"Your game?" Jim queried. "How does that come? Game, afoot, is anybody's meat."

"Not when it's runnin' afo' another man's dawgs, it ain't," the Deer-killer made hot reply.

Jim, who had killed game in his own country, many times, knew very well that the questiton of rights, raised by Brant, should not be productive of trouble or ill-will upon the part of any party thereto. Just what the custom was in the swamp country, he did not know.

"Why don't yo' take yo' own dawgs an' jump yo' own deers?" Brant demanded, while Colby considered the situation.

"My dogs are not the deer-chasing kind," he replied.

"Then why don't yo' kill the wuthless va'mints, an' git yo' some as is fitten fo' somethin'?"

Colby smiled.

"I wouldn't give one of my dogs for your whole pack," he laughed. "They are better dogs than yours, more useful to me. They herd cattle and sheep, and cattle and sheep are more important than deer."

Such talk outraged the swamp-man. His lips curled in a sneer, and he swore vehemently before replying.

"Then don' expect me an' my dawgs to keep yo' supplied with meat fo' yo' table!" he blazed. "Now back off from here. Leave my deer alone, or I'll sink lead in yo'." His thumb whitened on the hammer of his rifle, which, throughout the conversation, had continued to cover the settler.

"I guess you won't shoot me, Brant," Jim said, evenly. "There's a witness coming up the slough, and it's too late for you to shoot and get to cover!"

Tyronzy glanced quickly down the slough and saw that which Colby had been watching out of a corner of an eye for some time.

Roe Sutfin, her slim person erect upon the stern-seat of her dugout, was poling up-stream. A few minutes later she headed in and drew up beside the settler's boat. Her quick glance took in the situation unerringly.

"Who kilt the deer?" she asked quietly.

"I shot it," Jim informed her.

"An' my dawgs war a-chasin' of it," Tyronzy added.

"Now Brant says I'm a thief, because I did."

"An' that makes a liar out of Tyronzy," declared the girl, her eyes on the Deer-killer. "Why didn't yo' tell the truth, Tyronzy Brant?" she demanded.

The Deer-killer shifted his glance, making no answer.

"The rule in the swamp country is that a man whut kills a deer afo' another man's dawgs gits half the carcass, an' the dawgs' owner gits the other half," Roe explained. "Tyronzy knows it as well as I do."

"That's a rule amongst swamp folks, fo' thar own kind. It ain't fo' no damn squatter——"

"Stop!" Colby's voice was hard. He stepped toward the Deer-killer. "I don't like that word in your mouth—that word, 'squatter.' Don't ever use it with me again."

Brant, who had lowered his gun when he saw Roe, now elevated it to his hip again.

"Oh, I don't intend to hurt you," Jim told him, noting the act. "I'm just going to skin-out my half of that deer; seeing that it belongs to me, I want it!"

He set about dividing the carcass, and, when it was done, offered Brant the choice.

The Deer-killer, who had stood by sullenly all the while, fire raging in his heart, but unable to shoot the settler with the girl looking on, suddenly shouldered half the venison and stalked away into the timber, his dogs, having glutted themselves with their share of the kill, trailing him.

"I'm powerful glad yo' didn't let him take all the meat," Roe said, shyly, after the Deer-killer had gone. "He's biggerty enough, as it is, without havin' the chance to crow over yo'."

JIM stood looking down beside her. She made a pretty picture, sitting in the dugout with the woods of Buck Island for a background.

"I think I owe my life to you a second time," he told her, after a moment. "Brant would have shot, I believe, rather than let me have part of the deer; but you came up, and he was afraid. Tell me, why is he so afraid of you?"

"He knows I can an' will shoot, fo' one thing," she replied. "Another is, I've got lots of frien's 'mongst our folks, an' so has Pappy. Tyronzy Brant knows better than to offer me harm."

"Why did you threaten to kill him that night when you took me into your boat?" Jim asked.

"Sho!" exclaimed the girl. "Yo' ought to know why. Hadn't he jist shot yo' pappy, an' wa'n't it plumb natural fo' him to try to kill yo', seein' you is the son? He figgered, of course, that yo'd be hot after killin' him, so he'd better not give yo' the chance."

"Suspected that was the reason, at the time," Jim told her. "Still, after all, he's one of you—the swamp people, I mean. Why did you take sides with a stranger against him?"

"It ain't right to shoot even a stranger in the back, is it?" the girl asked, simply. "Besides," she continued, "he war already my enemy, an' my pappy's."

"Was that the reason—him being your enemy—that you nodded to me that day from the cabin door?"

"Yo' is powerful strong fo' reasons, ain't yo'?" she countered, her face flushing. "Maybe it's because yo' is so high educated, yo' jist kain't be satisfied without knowin' all they is to know."

Colby could not, for the life of him, tell whether or not he was being laughed at.

"Air yo' goin' to leave the swamps, lak yo' has been warned to do?" Roe asked, before he could frame a reply.

"What do you know about that?" he demanded.

"Oh, they ain't much goes on in the Buck Islan' country whut don't git to Pappy an' me, fust an' last," she evaded. "But ain't yo' goin' to answer my question?"

"Whatever else may happen, Roe Sutfin," Jim declared, looking steadily into her eyes, "I am not going to leave the swamp country. I have come to stay."

"I knowed it," exclaimed the girl, strangely exultant. "I knowed yo' wa'n't goin' to run."

Colby, strongly moved to speak out and tell the girl that she was, herself, reason enough to keep him there, turned away and busied himself loading his venison into his boat. He could not, now, say such things to her; not until after Christmas Day, at any rate.

"Howcome yo' to be up at the head of the islan'?" the girl queried, preparing to push off from shore.

Jim laughed.

"I'm thinking about giving a little party up here," he said, "and I wanted to find out just how many people I could take care of, at a pinch."

The girl looked at him, her face blank. Obviously, she had not the faintest notion of what he was talking about.

"Party?" she queried. "Do you mean yo' is goin' to give a racket up here in the woods?"

"There'll be racket enough, I guess," he answered, laughing.

"Oh!" Roe cried. "Can I come to it?"

"Well, no," Jim answered. Then he spoke seriously to her. "You would not want to be at such a party—racket, I mean."

The girl's face turned red, and her lips quivered.

"I reckon I knows why yo' don't want me," she told him, her voice trembling. "I ain't nothin' but a swamp gal, whut wears pants, an' don't talk——"

"Don't!" Jim cried, deeply hurt at sight of her emotion. "Don't say that, and don't think it. Why, Roe Sutfin, I wouldn't have you different in any way. As you are, you are the finest of all the things God ever created. Why, girl, I——"

He ceased suddenly. What about Christmas Day? Had he the right to say what was in his heart, to this girl, until after then? No, he had not.

Roe was looking at him with quite a different expression, now. Her eyes were wide with wonder, and her lips were parted with a smile that was both shy and tender. She waited.

"What was yo' goin' to say, when yo' quit?" she asked, naively, seeing that Jim's pause had lengthened into a full stop.

"I wonder if you will do something I want you to do, and not fail?" Jim asked, determined not to be led into paths it were better not to tread. "Will you?"

"Of course I will," Roe assured him. "Is it something about the racket yo' is goin' to give?"

Jim laughed.

"Yes. And this is what you must do: keep away from the head of the island, from the twentieth until after Christmas Day—and manage to keep your father away, too."

Roe's eyes grew big with wonder, and she seemed on the point of demanding to know just what it was all about. She changed her mind, however, and nodded in agreement.

"I don't know what makes yo' want me to do that—an' it don't make no diff'unce. I'll do it, just the same," she promised.

"You will understand, in time," Jim assured her, as he pushed off from the shore. "And remember what I said about having come here to stay. I mean it; I have come to stay."

If there was more vehemence in his voice than the speech seemingly called for, Roe did not comment upon it.

"I believe yo'," she said simply, "an' I'm glad."

As Jim's dugout swung round the head of the island, she whispered to herself, "I'm gladder than I ever was in all my life befo'."

VI

HE squatters were moving out, going back to where they came from!

Such was the nature of the news which spread rapidly throughout the swamp country a week before Christmas. It caused joy in the hearts of nearly all who heard it.

Roe Sutfin's face paled when her father brought the news to the island.

"I didn't expect 'em to go," Noah told her. "But I ain't sorry. Maybe thar'll be peace in the Buck Islan' region for a little while longer. But," and the old man spoke slowly, measuring his words, "ma'k me, others will come in the places of them as has gone. It may be a year—ten years—it may be tomorrow. But come they will. It is meant to be."

Roe did not credit the report, even then. It just couldn't be. Jim Colby, whom she had talked with no longer than a week ago, had told her he was going to stay—and Jim Colby wasn't the man to lie.

"I'm goin' to see fo' myse'f," she cried. "I'm goin' to see."

Hastening to the west shore of the island, she entered her dugout and poled across to the Colby place. Even when she was close enough to see that the cabin was no longer occupied, she still would not believe. Ashore, she could no longer doubt. The cabin was bare inside, and no stock was about the place.

She went slowly back to the island, hardly knowing how she got there. Going ashore, she paused to look back across the river; then she buried her face in her hands, sobs choking her.

"Jim Colby, I didn't think yo'd do it," she sobbed. "I didn't think yo'd run away, at all—an' never, never, without tellin' me in words, whut I has seed in yo' eyes. But you has gone, an' all I can do is to keep on a-lovin' of yo', an' hope that yo'll come back."

"'Keep away from the head of the island, from the twentieth until after Christmas Day—and manage to keep your father away, too.'"

The words came into her mind; it was as though she heard Colby speaking again, telling her what to do. She could even recall the look in his eyes as he stood on the shore, while she sat in her dugout, that day.

The girl's head came up, her sobs ceased, and her body stiffened.

"Jim Colby," she cried, looking toward the cabin just as though he were there and could see her and hear her voice, "I ain't goin' to believe no evil agin' yo'. No matter whut folks says about yo', an' yo' frien's runnin' away. An' I'm goin' to believe you meant whut yo' eyes said that day. I am goin' to believe it because I wants to believe it, an' because I know yo'd be powerful ashamed of me if I didn't. I'm goin' to do jist whut yo' tol' me to do—a-heedin' of yo' words, an' believin' in yo' all the time."

VII

HRISTMAS Day dawned clear and cold. A great fire roared in the clearing before Tyronzy Brant's cabin, and during the morning men came to it from all directions; grim, silent men, all armed. Most of them carried single-shot, breech-loading rifles, of the type the Deer-killer used; some, the older natives in particular, bore the muzzle-loading guns to which they would always cling. By noon fifty men had gathered, and the carcass of a deer, which had been roasting at the fire, was cut up and shared among them, along with much other wild meat which came from the house. Liquor was plentiful, but it was partaken of sparingly. The meal over, the Deer-killer arose to address the gathering. His words were few.

"Men," he began, "all of yo' knows whut yo' has got yo'se'ves together to do, an' every one of yo' knows in his heart whether he is in the right or in the wrong. If they is anybody here whut ain't satisfied to do whut we air about to do, he kin go now—an' nobody will think any the wuss of him."

He paused. Not a man moved. They squatted on their heels, listening, their faces expressionless. Brant went on.

"We is in the right, an' all of us knows it!" he shouted. "The squatters come amongst us, aimin' to take away our country. They covets it, an' they recognizes the rights of nobody but theyse'ves. We who has always had the swamp is jist so much trash under they feet; an' like trash they aims to treat us. They has the Gove'ment with 'em. They ain't no gove'ment favo'ble to us. So we is fo'ced to be our own. In our own rights we is goin' to act—an' act sudden'! The squatters was warned away an' told whut would happen today if they didn't go. At fust I thought they had took us at our word. They pulled out a week ago, lock, stock an' bar'l; but they didn't go far. They went into camp in Big Prar'rie, whah I saw them the fust night they war here, an' they put up shelter and corraled they stock. Thar they aims to make a stand. But in that they is fools; instead of bein' scattered everywhar lak they was, they is now all in one place together. We is goin' to git 'em all in one swoop."

"Thar's women an' childern amongst 'em, down thar, I take it?" The question

came from a grizzled trapper, who asked it when the speaker paused.

"We air goin' to shoot men, not women an' childern," Tyronzy cried. "But if they own folks ain't got sense enough to git 'em outten danger, we ain't called on to do it. Would we let a passel of snakes den amongst us, sparin' the old ones, jist because a few of the little ones might git in the way?"

The Deer-killer paused, awaiting the answer.

There was a stir among the men; then the reply came in a roar: "No!"

"All right," Brant ordered. "Take to yo' boats, men. We will drap down-river to the foot of Buck Islan' an' lay hid in the timber till dark. Then, when they campfires is all lit, we'll swoop down on the damn squatters an' sweep 'em outten the country, savin' only them as stays to fight. Them we'll keep—in they graves!"

There was no excitement among the swamp-men as they took to their dugoutts; they went calmly, unhurriedly, as though it were a deer hunt they contemplated. Two and three abreast, keeping together in some show of order, they dropped downstream.

The Deer-killer, waiting to see that no late comer would be left behind, took to the river directly after the last of the boats had left. It was his big day, the day of reckoning; and a passion of exultation shook him like an ague, all the way down the river. He would show Colby whether or not he could steal his country, his venison, his girl.

Swinging his long paddle dexterously, he overtook the main body of men just as they rounded the bend which disclosed the head of Buck Island.

"Take to the right, men!" he shouted. "Keep to the main channel."

Obeying directions, the leading dugouts followed the current and continued on past the headland, on the western side.

Suddenly the whole end of Buck Island became a sheet of flame, coincident with a roar of rifle fire which sounded like a crash of thunder. Flash after flash and roar after roar, each following the other so closely as to seem almost one continuous sound.

The men in the van, almost demoralized by the unexpectedness of the attack, rallied sufficiently to seize their guns and return the fire—but there was no one in sight to shoot at; they could only pour their bullets into the timber where the smoke and flame was thickest, and trust to luck. Unable to shoot more than once, without reloading, the swamp-men were at a double disadvantage: they contended, themselves on the open river and armed with old-fashioned rifles, against men under cover of the shore and shooting the best guns the times afforded. They were out-classed, outguessed, out-generaled.

Then a peculiar circumstances struck the river-men. Notwithstanding the fact that hundreds of shots had been fired at them, not a man had been killed. Only a few had received flesh wounds. What had they to fear from such poor marksmen?

"Charge 'em, men!" shouted Brant, making himself heard during a lull in the firing. "They kain't hit yo'. Onto 'em, an' take their damn guns away from 'em!"

But the settlers were not such bad marksmen as they seemed to be; they were, in fact, excellent shots, as was soon made plain.

"I'm sinking!" called Beeswax Brown from among the men nearest the island. "My boat's full of holes!"

The squatters were not shooting at the men in the boats, but at the boats themselves. All the dugouts in the van were leaking in their bows like sieves.

"Turn back, men!" shouted Brant.

The order was not needed; all who could were already headed back out of the danger zone. Soon the whole body was on the move, those in the splintered dugouts being hauled aboard the sound ones.

Then, from up the river and at a point overlooking the only route the boatmen could take, came a heavy crash of fire. The boats in the front of the retreating line now suffered, and there was not so much as the tip of a squatter's finger exposed to fire from the river.

Caught between two divisions of the enemy, unable to advance or retreat, the swamp-men huddled together in the middle of the river, their dugouts sinking, as helpless to escape as though they were surrounded by steel walls.

Then the firing ceased. Jim Colby stepped out of the timber on the island, and called to them.

"Come ashore, men!" he shouted. "No use drowning out there, like rats. Nobody will be harmed who comes ashore in peace. You might as well. You're outfought, and all of you know it. Who'll be the first?"

There was good sense in the young man's remarks. One by one the river-men drifted their dugouts down upon the island, some of them having to swim part of the way because their boats, gradually filling

with water since the shooting began, sank under them. At length every man of them, save one, reached the shore. The exception was Tyronzy Brant.

IS dugout having escaped serious injury, the Deer-killer remained in the river about half-way between the two pointts of attack. When the channel ahead of him became clear of men, Brant suddenly raised his rifle and, taking quick aim at the man he hated, fired.

Colby, however, had been expecting just such a move on the part of the Deer-killer, and not for an instant had he taken his glance from his foe. As Brant's rifle came up, the settler dropped to his knees and fired, the report of his rifle blending with that of his enemy's.

The Deer-killer's gun-arm went suddenly numb, and his rifle, drilled through the grip by a bullet, fell across the boat's bow, then slid into the river.

Instantly Colby was on his feet. Leaping into the nearest of the seaworthy dugouts, he shot it forward toward that of the Deer-killer. When he came almost within boat's-length of the latter, Tyronzy suddenly swung his heavy paddle above his head and let drive.

Colby ducked; his boat tipped, and the next instant he was in the water. Clinging to the gunwale of the shell, he rammed it forward, caught Brant's craft full upon the bow, and overturned it. Both men were in the water—the advantages even.

Brant, who had leaped when he saw what was about to happen, came to the surface knife in hand. Treading water, he drew away from Colby, who, armed with a long, keen bowie, maintaining himself above water with all the ease of an otter, advanced upon him.

"Throw your knife away, Brant!" Jim shouted. "We'll fight it out with our hands—that is, if you ain't the coward I've heard you are!"

The Deer-killer's response was immediate and surprising. With a quick jerk of his arm he flung the gleaming bowie from him.

"No man kain't call me a coward!" he cried. "I'll fight yo' any way yo' wants to fight."

Jim's knife followed Brant's, and the next instant the two were locked in a close embrace.

Just then Roe Sutfin and Noah came out of the fringe of timber. The old man stopped, looking upon the scene before him calmly. The girl, going as near to the water as she could, watched the battle with set, white face.

The men on Buck Island crowded the shore, watching the outcome of the fight. Any impulse to interfere, upon the part of either faction, was checked at the outset by the elder Colby.

"Let be, men," he ordered, quietly. "It's Jim's fight—his and Brant's. The best man will win."

The battle in the water raged furiously. Both men were good swimmers, and for a time neither was able to gain any advantage. Twice they sank, locked in each other's arms, rising when forced apart by sheer exhaustion. Breath regained, they were at each other again with renewed ferocity. A third time they went down, and, when they arose to the surface again, it was seen that Colby had gained the victory; the Deer-killer was nothing more than a limp rag in his arms.

When Colby, supporting the helpless form of his enemy, and treading water, drifted in to the shore, the hands of friend and foe alike were extended to haul them both to land. Brant lay like one dead, and Jim was all but exhausted.

Presently, however, he arose and leaned above Tyronzy.

"He isn't dead, men," he told them, satisfying himself that Brant's heart still beat. "He just couldn't hold out any longer."

Then he turned suddenly upon the swamp-men gathered in a group nearby.

"You see how it is, don't you, men?" he asked. "You can't hope to win against us. We've got better guns, and better brawn; better ideas and better ways of carrying them out. But we don't want to wipe you people out, as your leader has told you. We want only to do the things, here in this new land, that we have come to do—the things you won't do; couldn't do, for that mater. Now, there is a great swamp out yonder," he went on, waving an arm toward the eastern shore of the river. "It's thirty miles to the Mississippi—and all swamp. You are free to go into it. But you are not free to remain here. The west bank of the St. Francis is ours; we mean to keep it. Buck Island is not ours, nor do we want it; but neither do we want you free to use its cover against us."

He paused. The swamp-men stood silent and unmoving before him. So far as

Jim could tell by the expressions of their faces, they had not even heard.

"Now," he resumed, "I've got this to say: any swamp-man found armed, either on Buck Island—and I do not mean those who call for the purpose of religious worship on Sundays—or the western bank of the river, will be shot on sight. You are free to go now," he finished.

For a moment no one moved among the swamp-men, and no one spoke. Then Beeswax Brown, the bee-hunter, one of the oldest of the group, answered for all.

"We knows when we is whipped," he said. "An' I reckon there is enough room fo' us all, you on yo' side and us on ourn. It'll take two days to git my traps together; then I'll leave. Do that suit?"

"Yes. What do the rest of you say, men?"

"Beeswax has said it," called another of the crowd, and Jim saw agreement written in the faces of all of them.

When the last of the swamp-men had departed from the island, and Colby's men had taken their leave, Jim glanced toward Tyronzy Brant, who sat upon the ground, leaning forward, face buried in his hands.

Taking his rifle he walked over to the bowed figure.

"You lost your rifle in the river, Brant," he said, simply. "Take mine—it's a better gun. My boat is out yonder," and he pointed to where it lay against the shore.

Laying the arm across the Deer-killer's lap, he turned to the girl who had stood by silently.

"I knowed yo' wa'n't gone fo' good," Roe cried, running to Colby's side. "Tell me, air yo' hurt?"

There was no mistaking the look in her eyes. Colby thought she had never been so beautiful.

"Come," he said, and, taking her hand in his, he led her away toward the heart of the island.

Noah Sutfin watched them go, a light of understanding and approval in his eyes.

VIII

TYRONZY BRANT sat for a moment after Jim had left, staring vacantly at the rifle which lay across his lap. Then he arose unsteadily and approached the old trapper. He spoke haltingly, as though seeking for words.

"Noay," he said, "I somehow ain't takin' it as hard as I wishes I could take it; it don't seem as wrong, now it has happen', as it ought to seem." He paused, searching, groping for expression. "I don't rightly understand it all, but them squatters is diff'runt from us folks inside. They's bigger, an' fairer, than whut we-all is. They houses is diff'runt from ours; they dogs is diff'runt, an' so is they guns. They's not like us an' ours in no way. I knows the houses an' guns an' dogs is better than ours; an' I reckon the men is better, too. Noay, they has come to stay."

"Yes," Noah answered slowly, "they is diff'runt—another breed. An' whut has happen' today couldn't have turned out no other way. It war meant to be. The buck-bresh must give way to the co'n-stalk; the deers, an' them as chases 'em, has to give place to cattle, an' them as herds 'em; sloughs an' bayous gits to be dreenage ditches, an' the swamp waters run out. It's jist lak whut happen' to the Injuns. Whar is they tepees an' they little fields of stunted co'n? Whar is they huntin' groun', an' they herds of buffalos? They has parrished—swep' up, lak so much trash into a fire. Better men took the lan' they wouldn't do nothin' with—couldn't do nothin' with—an' made it whut it was meant to be."

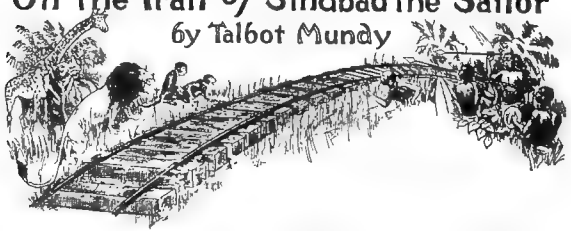
Tyronzy, leaning upon the rifle, listened intently to Sutfin's words. Vaguely, he seemed to grasp something of their import. Noah spoke again.

"I think that's whut the Master meant when he said: 'Go ye into all the world, an' preach the gospel to every creatur'.' The gospel of salvation, of progress, of better an' bigger things. The 'Postles was the fust pioneers, an' they's been pioneers ever since. Men a-waitin' to push the frontier out a little bit futher, to carry the good work on. Better men, with better houses, an' better dawgs, an' better guns; with better notions about progress an' the livin' of life, has come into the Sunk Lan' country. They is the better breed—an' the poorer one must hang on wharever it kin, until it parrishes off the face of the earth."

The Deer-killer drew a deep breath when the old man ceased speaking; then, in silence, he shouldered the rifle, stepped into the dugout, and headed up the river. It is to be doubted that he realized, even faintly, that he was only a victim of the great, natural law which demands the best, and decrees that the unfit shall perish. Perhaps his children will understand. Buck Island knew him no more.

On the Trail of Sindbad the Sailor

by Talbot Mundy



When bands of lions roared through the streets of Nairobi; when giraffes, rhinos, and monkeys added to the menace of hostile natives, it was indeed a hazardous undertaking to push the railroad and the white man's frontier into darkest Africa

THERE was a Bengali babu who once defined a frontier as "paradoxical community where devil gets foremost, and hindmost gets profits, if any." That definition probably applies to all the frontiers that ever were, if profit is only to be reckoned in terms of dollars and cents. And what are frontiers? The world is so old that, it is safe to say, wherever the white man has blazed trails new to himself there has always been a colored man ahead of him. Sindbad the Sailor, for instance, was in Zanibar before the Arabs; and the Arabs, using Zanzibar as half-way-house, plundered and, in their own way, governed huge reaches of Africa that until thirty years ago were empty spaces on the white man's maps. Arabs, with Indians in their wake, did all the first exploring, all the pioneering in what is now the Kenia Province under British rule. Then came the missionary and the Scotsman. Today all the "profits if any" are banked in London, Paris and Brussels.

No man knows who first invaded Central Africa by way of the East Coast, but there are plenty of references to the country in the "Thousand Nights and a Night." Earlier than B. C. 300 the Greeks had a colony in Socotra, an island in the Indian Ocean, whence they traded north, south, east and west; it was probably through those ancient Greeks that wild tales first began to filter through to Europe; wild they were, but men believed them and, after all, they were not much wilder than the truth, which would have stirred the wandering impulse of the frontiersmen in any event.

So over the desert that burns behind Mombasa, Tonga and Dar-es-Salaam adventurers began to find their way, and there began to pour eastward in return those endless streams of slaves and ivory that filled men's minds with dreams of easy wealth, until Vasco da Gama the Portuguese sailed around the Cape and seized Mombasa, built a fortress there that stands today, and started the white man on the Arabs' trail.

The Portuguese reaped nothing except hardship and hard fighting. It was centuries before the white man overwhelmed the Arabs, who kept their knowledge of geography and trade as secret as they could. Slave-gangs, yoked in twos and each wretch burdened with as much ivory as he could carry, were the real trail-breakers of the modern Kenia Colony; and such slaves as did not perish on the way were sold into Asia, where they were in no position to give much information to the white man who felt the lure of "Darkest Africa."

The tales of how the slaves were whipped and goaded on their way to the coast were as overdrawn as was Simon Legree. The Arabs were men of business; slaves were worth money, and so was the ivory that only the slaves could carry, because horses, mules and donkeys died from fly-bite and exhaustion on the journey. No man who has had much dealings with Arabs would accuse them of being es-

sentially inhumane, although they can be fierce and passionate; undoubtedly they did all they could to keep their slave-gangs high-spirited and hopeful in order to bring them to the coast alive. The whip was quite unnecessary; straggling was discouraged by lions, hyenas and marauding savages that stalked the line of march. And for the survivors destiny was not so bad; slaves, for instance, sold into Arabia were set free by inviolable custom at the end of seven years and thereafter became merged into the population with exactly the same rights as other people.

Malaria was, of course, the chief decimator of the slave-gangs; next, hunger and thirst on the march; then lions. As recently as 1900 lions were masters of all that hinterland between Mombasa and the Central African lakes, taking toll of all who crossed their kingdom of desert, forest and rolling highland. In the days before breech-loading rifles were invented odds were on the big game; a lion was a match for a man then, and knew it; rhinoceros, elephant and buffalo could be caught in pitfalls, but were men's masters in the open. Those who go hunting nowadays, with round-trip tickets to Nairobi and a professional guide who "guarantees sport," have no notion of the numbers of dangerous beasts that roamed that wilderness until a quarter of a century ago—dangerous beasts and savage tribes.

The Arabs only came and went in handfuls; there were no great armies of them. It was more diplomacy and courage that enabled them to establish themselves along the trade routes, than the sort of sheer force that later arrivals used. It is customary to suppose that the Arabs were treacherous rascals, who never kept their word with anyone; but whoever knows African tribes understands that the only way to manage them, or to get along with them, is to keep faith; and whoever has dealt fairly with Arabs knows that they do keep faith habitually. It is only when the Arab, through experience or ignorance, begins to lack confidence in the man he is dealing with that he falls back on treachery.

It was Arabs who enabled H. M. Stanley to explore the Congo and the sources of the Nile. They were naturally jealous of him, and in many instances unfriendly, but it was they who knew the trade routes and the languages; to them he had to go for information, and the tales—true ones—they told him would have given pause to any but a man of iron will. The truth, as usual, was vastly more staggering than fiction.

THERE is one tale, well authenticated, of drought in the Kilimanjaro neighborhood, when every vestige of food fit for humans disappeared and even the lions were lean. But they say the lions let humans follow them around and eat raw what was left of a kill when the lions had gorged themselves. The story is quite credible to anyone who has lived in the country. It is only very rarely that even a hungry lion will eat human flesh, and lions appear to know instinctively whether or not a man is dangerous.

The first time I ever saw lions I was unarmed and within twenty yards of two of them; they studied me for several minutes, appeared to decide I was incapable of hurting them, and left me, running away at an easy canter across open country. On many occasions since then I have been at close quarters with lions who made no attempt to molest me, although they always watched me curiously; but whenever I had a rifle there was never any doubt that the lion's determination to kill if he could was as unqualified as mine.

The natives of Africa never seemed to realize, as the lions did, that the coming of the white man meant destruction of such independence as they had. There were tribes, such as the Masai, who overran the highlands of East Africa, sold slaves to the Arabs, and fought all-comers, including missionary, merchant and white "protector"; but the fighting they did was for glory and plunder, and they let themselves be tricked out of their heritage without much difficulty. They offered no united front against invasion.

But the lions seemed to know that men on the march meant destruction for them in the long run. Instinct angered them. They followed the slave-gangs, picking off stragglers, almost never devouring their victims; it was hyenas, lurking near the lions, that ate the human flesh and cracked up skeletons—just as it was ants and other insects that obliterated almost all the traces of the long processions across the desert so that today there are not even broken bones to show where the slave-gangs suffered.

When the railway came and the white man made his first serious effort to control

East Africa the lions offered what seemed almost a deliberately organized resistance, a guerilla warfare deadlier than any opposition from the natives and not much less effective than the climate to discourage the working gangs of Sikhs and Punjabis imported from India to build the railway line. For political reasons the railway from Mombasa into the interior had to be put through swiftly. Briton was racing German for control of the head-waters of the Nile. The African natives, who could endure the climate and who knew how to protect themselves fairly well against marauding animals, mistrusted the white man's promises, doubted the outcome, and refused to work for any kind of pay; the Indians imported by the ship-load, unarmed and inexperienced, died and were killed off in hundreds.

Lions used to waylay the construction trains and drag the defenseless Indians from the open cars. It was considered inadvisable to give the Indian laborers guns, partly because the white men who had to control them were comparatively few, but also for fear they might go plundering the native villages and make conditions worse than they were already. The coolie camps along the line and at the railhead—mainly corrugated-iron shacks—had to be surrounded at night with huge bonfires, around which the lions roared unceasingly, pouncing on anyone who ventured out of bounds and often leaping in to drag away a mangled victim.

The mountainsides, up which the railway had to climb, were densely covered with jungle, and it was almost impossible to follow the lions to their hiding-places. The white engineers and surveyors did their best to protect the coolies, but they suffered almost as much from malaria as the Indians did, and when the long day's work was over and the mosquitos emerged to help the lions make the hot night almost unendurable, they were too few, too weary and too sick to guard the rail-head camps effectively.

THERE was one lion that accounted for so many men that superstition reduced the Indian coolies to inertia at last. They declared that some evil spirit had been incarnated in the animal, that the railway project had been vetoed by the powers of darkness, and that it was useless to try to go on. Work ceased. Not even promises of extra pay could induce the track-layers to resume.

It was known to be one and the same lion who had killed so many men—he killed more than fifty. Some had seen him; and, though he never used quite the same strategy twice, he always killed in the same way and always devoured the same portion of his victim, whereas most of the lions, although they killed, let human flesh alone.

The first serious concerted effort to bag that lion was made by four men who used a live bullock for bait and sat up waiting for him in a railway passenger coach on a spur-track that led into the jungle near the place where the lion was last seen. It was a pitch-dark night, and it was before the days of prohibition, so, as the lion did not come and the watchers grew sleepy, they shut the sliding car door at the end of the compartment and turned in on the four berths that ran parallel with the car's length, two above and two below. The open windows were fitted with wire mosquito-screens and they trusted to the noise coming through those to awaken them if the lion should arrive and attack the bullock.

Some time after midnight a man on one of the upper berthts was awakened by sounds he did not understand. He noticed that the door was shut and that the windows were all screened, but there was a strange smell, and a series of stealthy sounds that puzzled him. He spoke, but there was no answer, so he began to climb off the upper berth, groping with one leg in darkness. He stepped onto the lion's back!

The lion had contrived to open the sliding door from the platform outside, had entered, and the door had slid shut behind him by its own weight because the track was roughly laid and not level. He had killed one of the men on the lower berths immediately and in silence. At the moment when he was stepped on the victim's neck was in his jaws; he could only snarl sufficiently to awaken the other sleepers; and the space between the berths was too narrow for him to turn easily or strike with his claws, his deadliest weapons. The three uninjured men, all suddenly awake and in a panic, made a stampede for a small compartment at the car's end opposite the door. While they struggled and collided the lion jumped through one of the mosquito-screens, carrying his victim with him, entirely ignoring the bullock that had been plunging at his rope beneath the car window.

That incident made superstition worse, of course, and the Indian coolies began to demand to be sent back to their homes. A really serious effort had to be made to catch that lion, if possible alive, and then to execute him publicly in order to prove to the Indians that he was not immortal and was finally disposed of. So a heavy trap was built of wooden beams and railroad iron, with a division in it making two compartments. Into the smaller compartment a more than usually reckless coolie was bribed to introduce himself as live-bait.

The trap had to be left severely alone in the jungle, in order to allay the lion's suspicions, and the bait's sensations must have been unique. But the lion tried to take the bait. He entered through the open trap into the larger compartment; an ingenious contrivance slammed the door behind him and beast and man spent the rest of the pitch-black night together with the lion trying to break down the partition-bars in order to reach the man. In due course the Indian was released at the other end, to have his nerves restored with whisky and the payment of the sum agreed on.

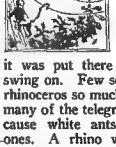
Then for the execution! Every workman within reach was summoned to attend. Every man who could beg or borrow a firearm was allowed to form one of the firing squad. More than a hundred men, with rifles of every known caliber, stood in a semicircle, while the lion crouched in the trap glaring defiance, and several hundred breathless spectators waited for the word to fire.

A man at one end of the semicircle waved a handkerchief. There was a ragged volley. The trap fell to pieces, shattered by bullets. The lion escaped, untouched.

The coolies, of course, were now satisfied beyond all doubt that the beast was an evil incarnation that could not be killed by human agency, and that the railway work must cease forever. But it happened a few days afterward that the lion selected a Masai for his next victim, and the Masai are magnificent spearmen as well as crafty hunters. The lion sprang from ambush, but the Masai stooped and impaled him on an eight-foot spear; and so the race against time toward the Nile's head-waters was resumed.

Speaking generally, nowadays one must go at least fifty miles from Nairobi to find a lion; if one is seen nearer than that he receives newspaper notices in the United States. As recently as 1903, after the completion of the railway to Victoria Nyanza, when Nairobi was only a corrugated-iron frontier town, with one hotel, a cluster of railway bungalows, an Indian bazaar, some government houses and one main street, the lions used to enter the town at sunset and go roaring through it, killing stray dogs and goats—or any human who was rash enough to stay out-of-doors. There were no street lights, and it was usually much too dark to shoot effectively.

Once, when a man opened fire from a frame-house window, a dozen lions raided the building, forced their way into it and killed the occupants. After that it was considered wiser as well as simpler to lock up everything and let the lions have the night to themselves, until in course of time the settlements grew closer and the lions withdrew. They are growing so scarce nowadays that there is even talk of protecting them along with all the other rare species of game that used to swarm in thousands in East Africa.



BUT the lions were not the only difficulty that the railway builders had to overcome. Mile-long sections of telegraph wire were broken down by monkeys, who seemed to suppose it was put there purposely for them to swing on. Few scraping-posts appeal to a rhinoceros so much as angle-iron, of which many of the telegraph poles were made because white ants devoured the wooden ones. A rhino weighs upward of three tons in his prime, so even angle-iron went down in front of him. Then, when the telegraph lines were in place and most of the difficulties overcome in one way or another, the height of the wire had to be raised by several feet because giraffes struck their necks against it and carried away whole sections.

The railway line was unprotected on either hand, and it passed through the most densely populated game-preserve that the modern world, at any rate, has seen. There were zebras, gnus, antelopes, in scores of thousands, along with occasional herds of elephants and rhinos by the dozen. One train in which I rode toward Victoria Nyanza was attacked by a full-grown rhino that charged the engine. The engine rolled him over, but he came on again and smashed the front passenger-coach, although he did not quite derail it. He ap

peared to decide then that a train was something more than he could lick, and walked off, so slowly that we supposed he was mortally injured. Although they stopped the train for half-an-hour and everyone who had a rifle joined in the pursuit to finish him off, and followed his trail for more than two miles, he got clear away.

The same train was delayed, later that morning, by an elephant on the track. He was going our way, treading rather gingerly between the ties, and in no particular hurry until the engine started whistling behind him. Then, instead of turning off the track, he stuck his trunk out, wiggled his tail and scooted straight ahead as if hypnotized by the railway lines. He went like mad for miles, with the engine whistling twenty yards behind him, his great ears spread out, and his thick skin shivering with panic. It was only when he reached a narrow culvert that the idea occurred to him at last to turn aside and let the train go by. He was too tired to go more than fifty yards, but stood, slobbering, red-eyed, his trunk drooping, his lungs going like bellows, wondering why he had not thought of that before, while the passengers all cheered him to the echo and the engine tooted him a friendly farewell.

It was, and is, against the law to shoot anything within a mile of the railway track on either hand, whether or not within the game-preserve. The animals took full advantage of it, and they seemed to know exactly where protection ceased. They were not tame within those appointed limits, but the huge herds of zebra and kongoni would hardly trouble themselves to move when the train went by, and very often the train would have to stop to let them cross the track.

Those herds that bred in the reserve and wandered out of it at certain seasons of the year for change of grazing, made the establishment of a ranch no easy matter. Land in those early days of the Protectorate was cheap, but the government insisted that whoever took up land should fence it. Barbed wire was the cheapest fencing, and the most practical because of grass-fires that made short work of posts and rails; but a herd of two or three thousand zebras going full pelt with a lion behind them, or galloping because they felt the joy of living, would strike a barbed-wire fence breast-on and carry it away for miles! It was the same with the rhinoceros; the barbs merely served to spur him to exertion, and the broken fence would trail along behind him until he finally shook the coils loose or was overtaken in the toils of it and shot by the indignant settler.

The rhinoceros was no joke, although a modern rifle drives a bullet through him easily and he is a fine big target, so that nowadays he grows scarce. He is a swift, astonishingly active, bad-tempered and as stupid as some people. When the rhinobirds that crawl all over him in search of ticks give warning of an enemy, he turns his nose up-wind and sniffs for a taint in the air. When he gets that he lowers his horn and charges, not often stopping before he hits the objective or is killed, and he is much too short-sighted to discriminate.

On two separate occasions I have lost a tent and practically everything it contained because a rhino smelt it during my absence and did not stop to argue but demolished it by following the line of scent at full speed. I knew one settler who built a small barn, for himself to live in while he built his house, only to have it knocked down by a rhino two days afterward.

Hippopotami, on the other hand, are practically harmless. There was a herd of them in Lake Naivasha, and there were several very large herds in Victoria Nyanza. The only real danger from them is at night, when they are grazing on the lake shore or along a river-bank; then, if one should come between them and the water, they are likely to stampede. They weigh three tons or so and don't step lightly, so it is advisable to let them stay between you and the shore.

I was once upset from a small boat by a hippo that heard the thump of the oars at midnight and plunged from the high grass into his native element, but he made no effort to attack me in the water; and it was thanks to his splashing that I escaped the crocodiles, of which there were plenty thereabouts. And I have often been out on Victoria Nyanza at night in a canoe, surrounded by hippos that never offered fight. They appeared mildly curious. If one kept absolutely still and silent they would come within ten or fifteen yards, their huge heads out of water and their small ears twitching, as they watched, apparently immensely interested. But at the first sound, or even the slightest movement, they would vanish instantly, swimming about six feet under water. I have heard tales of men being attacked by hippos, but although I tried I have never been able to track down one of those tales. Hippos will certainly fight if wounded, and the bulls fight furiously among themselves, but they are

naturally much too timid to be dangerous unless hunted or interfered with.

HE lure of Africa lies mainly in its hugeness. Even now, when railways pierce the continent in every direction, there is always a skyline beckoning, with mountain ranges blue beyond the plains. Now traveling is easy, and the last enemy to yield—malaria—succumbs to persistent onslaught of modern science. There are good hotels at Nairobi, and stores in the wilderness, where canned goods from Chicago are on sale. Long lines of barbed wire fence the white man's farms, and the herds of game, that used to wander where they pleased, are being hemmed into the reserve. But there is room even now for the man who hates to smell his neighbor's smoke; and for the man who does not lack imagination it is easy enough to tread the wilderness today and realize what masters of adventure were those old Arabs, who, before the days of steam or rifled guns, worked their way into the very heart of Africa.

In their day the Masai, with half-a-million spearmen, holding the vast green highlands and disputing right of way, were a problem that called for courage and resource to reckon with. Slaves and ivory, the Arab's main source of profit, had to be fought for without machine-guns or explosive bullets. Slavery was brutal and degrading from our modern viewpoint, and the Arab was a ruthless exploiter; he had to be, with a year's march between him and the coast, no more supplies than could be carried with him on men's heads, and every man's hand against him unless he could win friends by diplomacy. He had to impose respect through fear. He had to keep it by keeping faith with men who trusted him.

The pity of it is that no great Arab adventurer, such as Tippoo Tib, for instance, has left his memoirs. There are scores of books that tell the story of the white man's exploration into Africa, but few of them that give the Arab credit for what he did long before the white man came. Adventures against big game with modern guns make flat, uninteresting reading compared to what the story would be of how Arabs, with almost no resources but their own courage and indomitable will, plunged into the unknown and blazed the trails along which the white man fought his way with difficulty, with all the resources of civilization, the telegraph wire and machine-guns to support him.

Almost all Africa is still a frontier. There is still room there for a man to stand alone and prove to himself, for the good of his soul, his own ability to make good in a wilderness, where nothing will change unless he changes it, none but himself is to blame for what goes wrong, and for reward the only one worth having—knowledge that he has been, and seen, and dared, and played the man.

BUFFALO GRASS

DURING the days when the great buffalo herds roamed the prairies this grass covered thousands of square miles, but with the disappearance of the bison it thinned out and became scarcer and scarcer, yielding its place to the invading grasses accompanying the march of civilization. Alexander Majors, of stagecoach and wagon-freighting days, said that in the later days of the old overland trails it became impossible for the draft animals to pick up a living where only a few years before the buffalo grass was like a carpet as far as the eye could see. Like the other native grasses it grew fast, matured early and cured down against the ground before the fall winds swept the plains. The bottoms and the water courses were the homes of the blue-stem, valuable for hay; but on the open prairie, sweeping up to the foothills of the Rockies, the buffalo grass was supreme.

It was from an inch and one half to two inches and a half high, growing in great mats, and most favored of all grasses by the buffalo. In the winter they found it tightly curled down on the ridges which the winds kept free from snow. In the spring the new shoots pushed up through the old stalks, thus protected from early frosts, and compelling grazing animals to eat the cured and fresh grass in nearly equal proportions. From its stems it threw out suckers which took root at their joints and sent up new blades. Because of its shortness and the way in which it curled tightly against the ground when cured, the trappers said that "above the forks of the Platte the grass does not burn." Crossing the plains from the east this grass was not met with until nearly half the distance had been covered between the Missouri settlements and the foothills of the Rockies.—C. E. M.

YELLOW POISON

By ROBERT TERRY SHANNON

Gold—a fierce fever it injects into the blood of men, a wild frenzy such as Elihu Slocum had never dreamed of until that day in the wilderness when he gazed, horror-stricken, into the flaming barrel of his partner's rifle

WHEN their excitement had cooled down and the first wildness had begun to die in their eyes, the two men spread a blanket on the gravel bank of the stream. Between them they piled up into a little mound the few handfuls of the precious metal they had panned out of the shallow, sandy creek. Few of the lumps were bigger than the end of a man's thumb, most were smaller; some were scale-like, flat and irregular.

"So this is the way it looks in the raw. You're sure there's no mistake, Owsley? You're sure it's really gold?"

The man who had spoken appeared to be around thirty years old. Tall, slow of speech, an elusive nasal twang in his voice stamped him faintly as a New Englander. His name was Elihu Slocum; his hailing place Back Bay, Boston.

Squatting on his heels across the blanket, Slocum's companion lifted a seamed face stubbled with reddish beard. Both wore the garb of the wilderness—tanned deerskin leggings and hunting shirts.

"Am I sure it's gold?" demanded Owsley, harshly. "Ain't I always said there was bound to be gold in this country? Didn't I learn all 'bout gold by pannin' it out of rivers in Brazil with the Indians down there?"

Under his beetling brows Owsley's whitish eyes had something opaque about them like dull china.

"I wonder," said Slocum, slowly, "what change this will make in both of us. What you going to do with your half?"

"Half—only half!" exclaimed the other, raspingly. "So that's my share, is it? Me that guided us through deserts an' mountains an' forests—me that found it—only half—half!"

"Wasn't half and half on any gold we found the bargain?" asked Slocum. "That's my recollection of how we started out."

Three months before they had met. Owsley, staggering from an adobe *pulperia* into the presidio at Monterey, had reeled drunkenly before the entire ragged garrison of the coast town drawn up for inspection before the glitteringly arrayed commandant. From the same *pulperia* Elihu Slocum, a stranger, followed Owsley out.

"He stabbed José Armandas de la Noregio!" someone shouted, pointing at Owsley, who still, in a frenzy, carried the gleaming knife. "José, the halfbreed—he was stabbed!"

"Don't run, you fool!" Slocum called to Owsley. "They'll shoot!"

The half-starved soldiery surrounded both white men. On the spot the pompous and elegant commandant pronounced stern and autocratic judgment.

For the drunken man with the murderous knife let the sentence be a volley from a squad at six upon the following dawn. For the better-dressed *Americano* let a flogging suffice.

From the mud hut with grated windows

into which both were summarily thrown, Slocum had managed to get word to the captain of the brig *Vigilance* on which, as a passenger, he had come around the Horn following the scent of trade. Between the resident agent of the *Vigilance*, her skipper and the Mexican commandant of the port there existed a community of interest having to do officially—and unofficially—with the rigid Mexican customs duties, with the shipping of California hides and the bartering of shoes and calicos from Massachusetts. The jail door opened mysteriously for Elihu Slocum and he was conducted into a cool patio where the commandant sat at his ease. The commandant was a reasonable man, as he explained in his soft English. A small gift in American gold for his poor ragged soldiers—ah, certainly, señor. So Elihu Slocum escaped a flogging and gained his freedom. About the other man the commandant had caused inquiries to be made.

This Owsley was a bad *hombre*, a dissolute trapper and hunter who had been cast off even by the roving Kentuckians who sometimes came to Monterey to ship their valuable skins and furs and to partake of the delights of the pulque and the fandango. It was said he had once been a sailor before the mast and a mutineer.

"Nevertheless, I don't like to see the poor devil die," said Slocum, in his steady New England way. "He's white, and after all the halfbreed isn't fatally wounded. Besides that, he can teach me much about the country, since I sha'n't be going back in the *Vigilance*."

The commandant shrugged.

"California is still Mexico," he said, "and those who stay over two or three weeks must become Mexicans."

"I've heard about that," Slocum answered him, "but I've ordered my kit ashore and I sha'n't be going back right away. Now about this man Owsley—how much?"

So, too, for a sum of Boston gold, Tom Owsley came out into the bright sun dazzling on California sands, a free man in the year of 1835. Sober and grateful, he set aflame the interest of Elihu Slocum with tales of the great country behind the coast; of the Great American Desert with its far-scattered trading posts and its caravans of oxen-drawn wagons; of the towering, timbered Rockies; of fortunes to be made in trade; of beaver skins and buffalo hides to be bought for a song.

This was what Elihu Slocum had come for, but, with the thoroughness of his breed, he must learn at first hand. They outfitted at Monterey with two California horses and a pack mule. Then it was that Owsley had told his dreams of finding gold.

"I take no stock in such wild ideas," Slocum had said, "but even though I'm paying you fifteen dollars a month we'll share equally if we should miraculously find any precious metals."

"Right as rain!" Owsley had replied. "An' a four-square, upstandin' man you are for sayin' it."

ALL of this must have flashed through Owsley's mind, as it did Slocum's, now that the dream had turned to a reality. Under the level gaze of the New Englander, Owsley was forced to drop his eyes.

"Share and share alike—wasn't that the agreement?" persisted Slocum. "How do you expect more?"

There was silence for a moment; then the man with the red stubbled beard affected to grin.

"'Tain't no use argufyin' atween podners," he said—but there was an unnatural strain in his voice. "There'll be enough to make us rich fer life. We c'n do anything we like; we c'n be high-toned gentlemen——"

"Maybe," said Slocum, dryly. "The test of the pudding is the eating."

Over a smothered fire they cooked supper: a broiled squirrel shot by Owsley, *frijoles*, Mexican beans from Monterey, all but the last of their coffee and sugar.

Above them great mountains loomed in the dusk; from the sagebrush came the not remote barking of a coyote. Once, as the night darkened, they heard the cry of a cat-animal up-stream, a cry that sounded almost like the scream of a woman. In the morning they would wash out more gold. It was as easy as that—a virgin field.

For a time, now, they smoked in silence, each absorbed in his own thoughts.

"The trouble is," Owsley broke out abruptly, "how'll we git it out to civilization. It's a big proposition, Slocum. We'll hev to buy some nigger slaves an' set 'em workin' under guard. If we was to hire white men or Mexicans or Indians, why they'd simply keep what they got an' leave us out in the cold. We want to work this stream in a big way an' git everything—git it all."

"Did you ever hear of anybody who got

all of anything?" Slocum asked, quietly. "No; we'll have to pick our men, Kentuckians, hunters, white men. We'll put it on a sharing basis, a percentage of the findings for us in exchange for and acknowledgment of our discovery. We'll have to count on selecting honest men. It's the only way."

Silence again.

"Where you goin' to carry the stuff to?" Owsley asked at last.

"That depends on our location here. Maybe overland to St. Louis. I'll have to ask you where we are right now, Owsley. I don't know."

The other chuckled.

"With all your schoolin' an' smartness you're 'bout as helpless as a chicken, ain't you?" he chortled. "Well; Slocum, I don't blame you. 'Tis confusin' if you ain't used to trails an' oncivilized country; a city man gits all turned 'round, don't he?"

"I judge we've come a thousand miles from Monterey," Slocum hazarded. "Some of the time it seems like we've been traveling in a circle."

"Well, you don't hev to worry none 'bout them things," Owsley said. "I'll tend to all that. What gits on my mind is how soon c'n we git back to a Christian country an' spend some of this. Is this Boston you come from such a toney place? Me, I've always had a hankerin' fer excitement—with luxury." Apparently as a connection, he added, "Married a Mexican woman once in Chihuahua. 'Twas shore excitin' while it lasted."

"Boston's all right," Slocum said, briefly.

"They got everything there, I reckon," pursued Owsley. "I wisht you'd show me agin that pictur' you carry. Never heard tell of nothin' like it. What'd you call it?"

"Daguerreotype. It's a new invention."

"Let me see it again, will you Slocum?"

Reluctantly Slocum complied. Owsley fanned a flame from the embers and bent close to the light with the piece of chemically treated tin that represented the beginning of photography. The face portrayed by the daguerreotype was that of a young girl. Even so crudely depicted, the countenance bore marked evidence of a delicate, flower-like beauty.

"Your sister, you said it was, in Boston?"

"Yes."

Slocum reached for the picture, but the other man retained it for a half minute longer with devouring eyes.

"When I go to Boston I c'n see her, can't I?" he asked, as he handed it back.

Involuntarily, Slocum scowled.

"Perhaps," he said.

Something in his tone caused Owsley to flush darkly.

"I ain't good enough, I reckon!" he blurted. "I'm good enough out here a thousand miles from nowhere! I'm——"

Across the firelight he encountered some subtle frigid emanation from Elihu Slocum's personality which, instead of chilling him, sent him into a fervid surge of resentment.

"I was damn well good enough to find a fortune fer you out here in the wilderness!" he cried, in a shaking voice. "I was good enough to let you hev half when I could hev had it all—which was my right. An' I'm goin' to tell you somethin' else, Slocum; I'm damn well good as you be, the best day you ever seen. I'm damn well good enough to go to Boston if I like an' marry that gal!"

Slowly Elihu Slocum got to his feet and stood over Owsley, who was sitting cross-legged beside the fire.

"Owsley," he said in a voice like stinging sleet, "don't ever think of my sister again and don't ever mention her name—anywhere, any time, so long as you live. Is that clear?"

Owsley struggled to his feet, blustering. "Don't try to come over the gentleman on me!" he cried. "I'm as good a man any day as any long-legged, blue-nosed, psalm-singin' Yank that ever breathed. Yes, an' I'm as good as any sister of any——"

A hard, bony fist at the end of a long arm crashed against Owsley's jaw with the force of a thrown stone. Inertly, the man dropped.

"As long as you behave yourself and act like a man you'll find me a pleasant fellow," Slocum said quietly. "Do I make myself plain?"

The fallen man managed to struggle to a sitting posture, his legs outspread before him like the letter V. With one hand he clamped his jaw.

"Damn you!" he grated.

Slocum appraised him coolly.

"You're not a formidable man, drunk or sober, Owsley," he said calmly. "We're not going to quarrel. Most likely the gold has turned your senses, but you ought to come to yourself by morning. For my part, I'm going to sleep and I advise you to do the same."

Deliberately, Slocum unrolled his blan-

ket and wrapped himself for sleep. Overhead, the stars had come out far brighter than in his native New England. A crisp chill was in the air, but inside of his deerskin hunting suit his body was pleasantly warm. Three months of wild life had toughened his frame to find comfort easily, almost as a savage finds it.

Owsley made his preparation for the night slowly. Once Slocum thought he heard him tampering with the pack which contained a small bottle of rum, carried for emergency. A delicious, physical fatigue stole over the new-comer to the wilds and he dismissed Owsley from his thoughts. The man was a dissolute fool, nothing more. Of the bestial ferocity that might have lurked in the breast of the half-wild, gold-maddened wanderer, Elihu Slocum concerned himself not at all.

IN THE morning he awoke, completely conscious at the first opening of his eyes. The dead ashes of the night's fire met his gaze. The tethered horses and the mule were picking contentedly at the gramma grass.

Owsley had gone.

For a moment Slocum was puzzled, for the other usually slept the later. Although the man's blanket was in place, his long-barreled rifle was missing. Owsley evidently had arisen early, perhaps in a spirit of contrition, to shoot game for their food supply.

At the stream Slocum washed in the cold, refreshing water; stood erect and drew his lungs full of the wonderfully invigorating morning air. Gradually, the life in the open had taken hold of him, had filled him with a new elemental strength, had washed away the old, incrusted ideas of a cultivated society.

Slocum stretched his arms, flexing his muscles and reveling in the vigor of physical fitness. It came to him, almost as a voice of conscience, that his destiny had become permanently linked with the great primitive magnificence of these towering mountains and far-flung plains.

Elihu Slocum knew that he would never go back to live permanently again in the old cramped circles of the East. Money, a commercial instinct, had lured him to the scarcely explored West; now it was something more, something bigger, that was holding him.

Only at the last did he think of the gold find of the day before. Odd it was, too, that a man's natural love of wealth could be dwarfed by a surge of other feelings. Yet it was so; Elihu Slocum considered the riches within his grasp without any particular exhilaration. He pictured himself back in Boston, a rich man, going through the same conventional routine as other rich men. There was no thrill whatever in the idea.

"But I can't allow myself to get improvident," he thought, as a fragment of his old thrift reasserted itself. "Business first and no foolishness; that's the ticket!"

With a jerk he threw off the introspective turn of his mind and became his old shrewd self. He was conscious, suddenly, that he was ravenously hungry for breakfast.

"Oh, Owsley! Oh, Owsley!" he halloed, his voice carrying far along the banks of the stream. To himself he added, "If he doesn't show up I'll catch myself a mess of trout and cook them."

Some slight stirring in a clump of bushes fifty yards away attracted his attention. He peered closely, and suddenly a cold, gripping pressure clutched at his heart.

The morning sunlight was glinting on the barrel of Owsley's rifle in the bushes; the hollow end of it was pointing with deadly menace straight at Elihu Slocum.

For an instant he stood perfectly motionless, his brain crackling with the realization that the next moment might be his last. His eyes now detected Owsley's face coming into view, a mask of sullen evil. The man had him accurately covered; he was a dead shot.

What was the motive for such hatred—greed for all of the gold, revenge for a blow, a horrified resentment at an implied social inferiority? Slocum did not know. Like electric sparks such thoughts flew through Slocum's mind. Until they had found gold Owsley had been at least a tolerable companion.

It came to Slocum that there was no use in calling out in protest or pleading. By the squinting of Owsley's face it was plain that he was already sighting along the barrel. Slocum clamped his teeth shut.

The spurt of flame from the end of the rifle reached Slocum's eyes before he heard the sharp crack of the explosion.

In that instant of peril Slocum's power of reasoning seemed to speed up a hundred fold. A whistling sound by his ear had told him that the usually steady aim of Owsley had been shaken, most likely by the

protracted strain of carefully considering a cold-blooded murder.

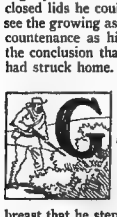
Apparently Owsley, too, realized that he had missed, for he threw his rifle aside and, with a savage cry, instantly brought another one up to his shoulder. It flashed upon Slocum, for the first time, that he had not noticed his own rifle anywhere about when he had arisen from sleep. That was it then—Owsley had taken both single-shot weapons; if one failed he would have a second in reserve.

Chance—a bad aim—had saved Slocum from the first shot. But it was scarcely believable that a marksman of Owsley's ability would miss an easy target twice in succession.

Though scarcely five seconds had elapsed since the shot had been fired, Slocum was surprised at the coolness of his own brain, at the amount of thinking and reasoning he had time for. Something like a prayer of thankfulness went up from him that Owsley was a slow man, slow of action and slow of thought.

Shrewdness, the inbred faculty of doing the right thing at the right time, came to the New Englander. Strategy alone could now operate to save his life.

Like a man who had been shot dead on his feet but left standing for a fragment of time, Elihu Slocum slowly pitched forward, with the slowly gaining momentum of a toppling tree. If the bullet had, in truth, pierced his heart, he could have fallen with no greater realism. He did not raise his hands; his face struck the sandy gravel of the river bank with bruising force, but he moved not a muscle. The impact of his face on the ground had turned his head slightly to one side; through his partly closed lids he could still see Owsley, could see the growing astonishment on the other's countenance as his mind seemed to grasp the conclusion that his first shot, after all, had struck home.



GRADUALLY the man lowered the rifle that he had been on the verge of firing. Surprise melted into relief on Owsley's face. So great was the excitement that labored in his breast that he stepped forward through the bushes still holding the rifle to his shoulder, as though he had forgotten to take it down. Gradually, however, he lowered it as he came cautiously forward, ready to aim again instantly and complete his bloody work if, by any chance, he was deceived.

By a rigid effort Slocum controlled his breathing until the sharpest eye could not have detected the slightest sign of life in his prone body. For a few seconds he was safe.

Advancing a few steps at a time, halting for a moment and then advancing again, Owsley furtively approached the man he had sought to kill. At any time it would have been easily possible for him to have lifted the rifle and sent a finishing shot into the stretched-out body before him. At the slightest sign of life in Slocum he undoubtedly would have done exactly that. A murderous logic certainly would have impelled the final, killing shot. Yet, there are a few men who at such moments, are capable of logic of any sort; and Tom Owsley was not one of them.

When he was within a few yards of the motionless figure sprawled on the sand he stopped. A vein in his neck was jerking visibly and his face twitched; the fingers that still held the rifle breast high were so tightly gripped that the bones of the knuckles showed like white marble. Then, with a queer laugh in his throat, Tom Owsley stepped forward and poked at the breathless form with his foot.

As well might he have roused a sleeping tiger to action. The long legs of Elihu Slocum served him as well as steel springs to throw him upward. As he rose he came up fighting, closing with Owsley in an embrace that rendered the rifle useless.

With the advantage of surprise in his favor, Slocum bore the other backward as he rained blows with one free hand upon face and body. Against the unexpected assault Owsley fought back viciously and with skill, despite his astonishment. Physical courage of a sort he had and there was an oak-like strength and toughness in his stocky frame.

One solid fist came up and cracked against Slocum's jaw, reeling him backward.

"Now, damn you—" breathed the would-be slayer.

With surprising quickness his hands slid downward to the end of the rifle's barrel and, retreating a step, he swung the heavy stock at Slocum's head with all the force of his broad back behind the blow.

Had it landed it would have crushed the victim's skull, but by the barest fraction of time Slocum ducked his head, escaped the swishing bludgeon and charged again.

This time there was no respite from the fury of the attack. Elihu Slocum was

fighting to stave off death and he fought with an intelligence behind his fists that his antagonist did not possess. One after another his blows smacked home; with conscious design he forced the fighting, never giving his man the chance to recover his balance lost in the rushing assault.

Driven desperate and bleeding, Owsley swung a heavy foot at Slocum's stomach. The Boston man leaped sidewise and, with the quickness of a cat, seized the upflung leg in a grasp of iron. There was a quick, wrenching twist, a heave of shoulders, and Tom Owsley hit the ground on the flat of his back with a force that knocked the air from his lungs.

Necessity knowing no code, Slocum ignored the vanity of fair-play, so-called, and was on top with a leap. Steely fingers dug deeply into the under man's bronzed throat while powerful knees pressed down on his arms, pinioning them to the ground. A moment of writhing and the end of the struggle was at hand; the blackening face of Owsley told Slocum that further pressure was unnecessary.

FROM the other's waist the victor tore off the leather thong which had girdled the hunting jacket. No more than a minute was required to twist him over, pull his wrists behind his back and bind them with slip-loops and double-knots until the leather sank tightly into the flesh.

"Get up!" The command came like the crack of a whip.

Awkwardly, Tom Owsley got to his feet.

"It's no go, Slocum," he said harshly, through puffed, blood-smeared lips. "You dasn't dare try to kill me. You'd never get out of this wilderness alone. You don't know the trails. You got to keep me alive to pilot you back——"

Slocum's chest was rising and falling.

"I ought to break you in two and throw the pieces away!" he said.

"Cool down a minute," urged Owsley, with a crafty gleam in his pale eyes. "Don't let your temper get the best of you. You've got the upper hand now, but it won't do to kill me as you'd like to, Slocum. You'll never find your way back to Monterey alone; your bones'll bleach somewhere out here, jest the same as mine."

Elihu Slocum looked at his prisoner with a deep scowl, as he tried to fathom the other's murderous nature.

"In the name of Heaven, man, why did you try to shoot me down like a dog?" he demanded.

"I been drinkin' that bottle of rum all night; it kinda made me crazy, I reckon," Owsley whimpered. His china eyes shifted uneasily. "The truth is that you made me mad clean through last night—yes, an' that gold we found went to my head worse'n any liquor on earth. It was the gold mainly, Slocum; I've seen men afore now druv clean out of their senses by findin' it. The damn stuff wakes up all the devils in hell. I'm tellin' you God's truth; I wanted it all for myself an' I wasn't responsible for what I done—not when my hide was filled up with that rum."

Steadily, the keen eyes of the New Englander had been appraising the man as he confessed.

"If I thought you were telling the absolute truth——"

"You've had the truth an' nothin' else," said Owsley. "For once in my life I spoke out straight."

"I wonder—I wonder if you had the opportunity anew if you wouldn't try the same thing again, Owsley?"

"I might," said Owsley slowly, almost solemnly. "There's no use tryin' to lie now. I might—but, then agin, mebbe I wouldn't."

Slocum's lips were set in a grim line as he reached to his belt where a hunting knife was sheathed.

"Then I'm going to take a chance on you," he said. "Turn around; give me your wrists."

With a quick slash he freed the man of his thongs. Owsley looked at him curiously.

"You're a peculiar critter, Slocum," he said. "Most anybody else'd took revenge. You—you don't look like you even bear any grudge."

"No, I don't bear you any grudge," Elihu Slocum told him. "You're not the man I'd pick for a bosom friend, but I'm not fool enough to poison myself hating you—or fearing you, either. It's like this, Owsley——"

Slocum stooped and picked up the fallen rifle; with a long swing he threw it out into the bed of the stream.

"That's to keep temptation out of your way," he explained. "The other gun back in the bushes can stay where it is. Hand me your hunting knife, Owsley."

With wondering eyes, the other obeyed. Slocum threw the knife in the river after the rifle.

"Now the only weapon left in our little

party is my own knife, which I'll carry inside my shirt where you can't easily get it. Get this clear in your head, Owsley: I've rendered you harmless the best I can, so far as weapons are concerned. If it comes to a hand-to-hand fight I can whip you. I know it and you know it."

"I'll give you my word, if it's any good to you, that I'll lift nary a hand agin you, Slocum," Owsley promised. "But we ought to keep our rifles. If we was to run across a bunch of Indians——"

"We'll chance that."

"Game'll have to be killed, too. We got to eat."

"That also, we'll chance," Slocum said firmly. "Somehow, we'll find things to eat till we get back to Monterey."

"Monterey— When we git there, you ain't goin' to put a charge of attempted killin' agin me with the commandant, are you, Slocum?"

Slocum shook his head.

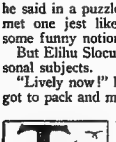
"If you could get it through your mind, Owsley, that I'm going to play fair as long as you do the same, why, we'll both get along a heap better together. I'm going back to the coast and see if I can't get together the right kind of white men to come out here and work our find. Our bargain of half and half between us still stands. You'll have to guide the working party back here because, as you pointed out, I'm no woodsman."

Tom Owsley looked long and hard at the New Englander, as though he were trying to fathom unplumbed depths.

"You're a strange customer, Slocum," he said in a puzzled voice. "I ain't never met one jest like you afore. You hold some funny notions."

But Elihu Slocum was through with personal subjects.

"Lively now!" he said, crisply. "We've got to pack and move."



TWO human scarecrows under a setting sun plodded westward through hot, powdery sand that clung like a cloud kicked up by their feet and by the hoofs of the slow, gaunt mule that followed them.

Thirst, hunger, and privation had sapped the strength of the men until each step was a leaden drag; had shrunken their forms to almost skeleton proportions; had converted their faces into burned, leathery masks over bony ridges and hollows. In dress they were as fantastic as wild men, for the soft deerskin clothing they wore had long since been ripped and torn by cactus and sharp mountain stones; between the ribbons of their garb occasional glimpses of their naked bodies were revealed. The mule which dumbly followed was an emaciated wreck scarcely able to bear the pack with which it was loaded.

For weeks the men had been short of food, because they had no firearms with which to shoot game. For the most part they had subsisted on scanty rations from the depleted mule pack, eked out by such small game as rabbits and birds which they had occasionally been able to snare.

Filling their water gourds at the last stream, they had attempted a short cut across a sandy waste. Once fairly into it there was no turning back when their calculations proved incorrect. The horses had been the first to succumb. Thirst and the lack of grasses had killed them, mostly thirst.

Slowly, one of the men ceased to walk, and stood weaving on his feet.

"It's no use, Slocum," he said in a voice dull with exhaustion. "I cain't go on no further. I'm burned out complete."

The second tatterdemalion also came to a halt.

"If we only knew for sure that we were going toward Monterey——"

"You'd keep right on walkin', would you?" the other growled. "Well for the hundredth time, I tell you I don't know where we're at. My head's a-burnin' up, I tell you——"

"All right, Owsley," Elihu Slocum said, listlessly. "Only, try to keep civil, will you?"

Owsley fumbled with the straps that held the pack on the mule, loosened the animal's burden and let it slide to the sand.

"I'd 'a' been cool as a frog on ice if you hadn't throwed away our guns an' starved us to death," he grumbled. "You got me weakened down so that I cain't tell what I'm doin'. An' ten to one you lost our gold, too."

"No," said Slocum, shaking out a blanket from the pack. "I'm still carrying it. You can take charge of it though, if it worries you."

Owsley reached out a skinny hand. A buckskin bag as big as a good-sized tobacco pouch passed between them. Owsley stowed it in his shirt.

"I'm glad to get rid of it; it's a drag to carry. I don't care if I never see another piece of gold as long as I live, anyway," Slocum declared. "I didn't come

out here for gold in the first place," he added, more to himself than to his companion. "I'd a thousand times rather run a trading post."

The mere possession of the pouch of nuggets seemed, in some peculiar way, to hearten Owsley. His drab eyes brightened and he moved almost with alacrity.

"If I only had a quart of water I believe I could make it on in," he mumbled, feverishly.

From out of the litter of the pack he picked up a water gourd and raised it to his parched lips. The gourd had been empty for two days.

"Damn you, Slocum!" he cried. "You drunk it empty when I wasn't lookin'! You orter be killed for doin' it!"

"You seem to forget, Owsley, that you had the last drink, the very last drop." Slocum seemed as dry of passion as the gourd was of water. "Is there anything at all in that rubbish—any of the beans left at all?"

"Nary a thing!" Owsley kicked their useless pans and sacks.

A breeze sprang up, tantalizingly sweet. Later it would be cool—even cold—enough for sleep. The stars would come out and the coyotes would howl, but there would be precious hours of rest. On their spread out blankets they sprawled their wasted forms. Neither bothered to tether the mule. By instinct the suffering animal seemed to sense that its only hope for salvation was in staying close by its human companions.

Dusk deepened, and a distant sound of tolling bells reached their ears. Both men fancied for an instant they were dreaming. At first neither spoke, both straining their ears. Slowly, the faintly sonorous sounds were repeated.

Emotion quivered through each man.

"Do you hear it, Owsley? Is it really bells—or—or what?"

Both were now standing. Owsley, forlorn as a specter, stretched a thin, ragged arm in the direction of the sounds.

"Bells it is," he said in a husky whisper. "Bells, Slocum. Remember the direction—that way—the sound carryin' on the still air——"

"If that's true, we're saved," Elihu Slocum breathed. "We've got enough strength yet to make it. We'll start before dawn and——"

"Bells!" repeated Owsley in his ghostly voice. "It's the mission bells tollin' sunset, Slocum. It's the Jesuit Mission close by Monterey!"

PERHAPS it was reverence, perhaps it was exhaustion that made Elihu Slocum bow his head while Tom Owsley stared into the west. Suddenly a claw-like hand clutched into Slocum's arm and he felt the other man trembling from head to foot.

"What is it?" he demanded. "What's the matter?"

Owsley licked his harsh lips with a dry tongue.

"My God, Slocum!" he quavered. "Look there—I seen it move in the brush—look! It's a *man!*"

Slocum's eyes, weak from the glare of the desert sun, narrowed. Then unmistakably he, too, saw what Owsley had seen. Partly obscured, not fifty feet away, something crouched.

Owsley shrank backward. It was Slocum who stepped toward the form.

"Hallo!" he called. "Who's there?"

The form rose upright, tall and straight with a blanket cloak hanging from its shoulders. The few days he had spent in Monterey had made the New Englander familiar with this, the typical Indian dress of the mixed bloods and the aborigines.

"Speak!" he cried out. "Speak if you are really flesh and blood."

There was a low laugh, almost satirical. "*Si*, señor," said the voice. "Eet ees only poor Eendian."

With a certain indefinable dignity the startling visitor walked toward them.

At the sound of the voice, the marked Spanish accent and the coherent words, Elihu Slocum's nerves steadied immediately.

"Thank God for your coming," he said, solemnly. "You come in the nick of time. Perhaps you will be the final means of saving our lives from this hellish desert."

"We mus' help wan anoder; tha's what the good *padre* say," said the stranger, with a remote suggestion of insolence in his tone. "P'raps you will help me with somet'ing to eat." There was in his swaggering stride something that, plainer than words, bespoke the predominant heritage of old Castile.

Owsley now came forward.

"Like hell we will, Injun," he said morosely. "If we had it we'd eat ourself."

"Monterey—is it far?" asked Slocum. "If you will guide us there I'll see that you get all you can eat and more too. I've

money there in the hands of Walker, the English trader——"

The Indian looked at him stoically; yet when he spoke his voice was not unpleasant.

"I t'ank you for kin' words," he said, speaking directly to Slocum and ignoring Owsley. "You can find Monterey easy. Eet ees only mebbe dozen miles."

"But I'll pay you well if you will guide us. We're both scarcely able to get along; we're weak as cats——"

A slight shrug animated the shoulders of the Indian; his luminous eyes seemed to glint resentfully, not at Slocum but rather as though at some unpleasant thoughts of his own.

"My frien'," he said with a sudden flair of Latin fire in his words, "Monterey has drive out eets wors' *hombre*, which ees me. With dogs an' horses they run me to desert, but the good wind eet blows the sand so the dogs lose the scent, an' poor Eendian hide behind cactus so they on horses cannot see heem. *Si*, señor, thees Monterey does to me, an' I cannot guide you back. But they will not follow me, for een Monterey they get tired queek. They theenk I die een desrt—but, ah, no. Eet ees not so. No; I find heem water-hole an' I mak' my way out some oder place pretty queek."

At the mention of water, both Slocum and Owsley surged with overpowering desire.

"If you can find us water—" cried Slocum. "We're perishing, man! If you can get us water you can name your own price for it. Yes, and I'll guarantee to buy off the commandant in Monterey so you can go back."

Rarely does a halfbreed smile, and then only when he is deeply moved. Something in Slocum's words seemed to touch an odd spot in the Indian's nature. His lips parted in a strange, cruel grin.

"Eet was the commandant heemself, señor, that got stuck with my knife," said the Indian. "Eet was pleasure I have long wait for."

For the first time it dawned upon Elihu Slocum that there was an intangible ferocity about this strange wanderer driven out into the waste land by a society even as primitive as that of Monterey. In the shining eyes there was a look, now revealed, of a warped nature—the cold glint of the natural killer.

"I can sympathize with you," Slocum said, with instantaneous tact, for he realized that life itself might depend upon his words. "I happen to know that the commandant was—well, I had dealings with him once myself."

"Then you know," said the Indian gravely.

"If we had any food you could have it and welcome," Slocum continued. "Also you can depend on it that when we arrive in Monterey we will not tell of meeting you; we'll keep it a secret."

The strange creature bowed.

"*Gracias*. Eet ees pleasure to meet such mans as you. Eef I could do favor in return I would. But, alas, I have only small bottle of rum, an', as you know eet ees bad medicine in desert. Eet ees no good for the water thirst."

With a sudden awakening of boldness Tom Owsley projected himself in front of Slocum.

"Look here, Injun!" he cried excitedly. "If you've got rum I want it. I'll pay. Look here—" From inside his shirt he hauled out the pouch of nuggets. "Here's gold, the pure, unminted, virgin stuff. Gimme that bottle an' this gold's yourn!"

Slocum stretched out a ragged arm.

"No!" he commanded.

"Keep away from me; you an' me is quits!" Owsley told him viciously. "I'm sick of bein' bulldozed by a damned ignorant Yankee. Come on with that bottle, Injun, afore I die with thirst——"

OWSLEY stopped speaking as though his lips had become paralyzed. Some changing expression on the Indian's face seemed to petrify him in awful fascination.

"My God!" he managed to whisper.

Once more the Indian smiled with a cruel twist to his lips.

"*Madre de Dios!*" he said softly, with unholy unction. "So—we meet once more, my frien'!"

Slocum looked curiously at the two who seemed suddenly to have become unconscious of his presence. Owsley's lips moved wordlessly; the Indian's lips were still twisted in his bitter parody of a smile.

"I have waited long time since the day you stabbed me at the *pulperia* in Monterey," said the halfbreed, with his strange suavity. "The good Lord kep' me alive, an' the good commandant he turned you loose—ees not so?"

A knife appeared mysteriously in the Indian's hand. He had ceased speaking as

a visible tenseness ran through his body, as his somber eyes began to glow with a greenish fire.

"Look here, now!" Slocum cried sharply, with the old Massachusetts twang dominating his voice. Vaguely, it had come back to him that he, too, had seen this Indian before, that this was the man Owsley had knifed in the drunken brawl. "Don't you touch that man; he's too weak to defend himself!" Slocum protested in horror as the purpose of the grim visitor was all too evident.

Bloodthirsty revenge appeared to have transfixed the Indian with an overpowering intensity of passion. For one moment he was motionless in a strained, queer silence; he was as a puma the instant before it springs; a rattler before it strikes.

Elihu Slocum realized sickeningly that neither he nor Owsley had the physical strength to thwart the murderous will of the Indian. Thirst, hunger, and exhaustion had sapped from their nerves and muscles the last ounce of bodily virility; against the lithe animality of the other they were but dry, empty husks.

Beneath his sun-blackened skin, Owsley's face had taken on an unearthly pallor. Yet, somehow, he managed to find his voice.

"Hold on!" he cried in tight words. "Don't strike, an' I'll make you the richest man in the world." He held aloft the small leather bag of nuggets. "I've got gold here! There's more where this come from! I'm the only one that knows how to find it. You'll be rich, Injun—enough fer ten million acres of horses an' cattle—fer the purtiest girls in California——"

Desperation of body and soul in dire terror gave a wild, magnetic ring to the surge of words.

"What's the good of killin' the onliest man on earth what can make you a king!" he went on rapidly. "Open this bag an' see fer yourself!" He thrust the nugget pouch forward.

Slowly, the Indian relaxed and, still cautious, took the leather bag.

"Don't bother 'bout this other feller with me," Owsley urged, jerking his head toward Slocum. "He ain't nothin'. He don't know nothin' an' he ain't got nothin' on earth to do with this gold. Me—I'm the only one that knows where it is. Me—I'm the one to tie to, Injun. I'll make you the best partner a man ever had!"

The Indian backed away a few steps; the knife had returned to its mysterious hiding-place under his blanket cloak. He was utterly silent.

With burning eyes the two white men watched the half wild creature as he loosened the draw-string and poured the golden pellets into his lean brown hand. Silence gathered around the three, as a gilded moon bathed them in pale light.

The nuggets in the Indian's hand looked no more valuable than so many lumps of dirt; yet the man, evidently, was fully aware of their preciousness. A change was occurring on his countenance, an emotional disturbance that even a stolid nature could not entirely control. At the flanges of the nostrils there was a widening movement; the murderous contortion of the lips seemed to uncoil and disappear. Miraculously the cruel mouth lost its menace and hung half open with a grotesque looseness.

The halfbreed raised his face. Glints of moonlight caught in their polished jet depths and imparted to his gaze an eerie quality that obliterated the last vestige of his revengful design upon Owsley's life.

It was to Slocum that he turned.

"Es the truth?" he asked in an unnatural voice.

"It's the God's own fact," said Elihu Slocum. "What Owsley says is true. I'm a tenderfoot and I couldn't find my way back to where it came from in a thousand years. I don't care; all I want is to get back to Monterey with my life."

The Indian stowed away the bag in his clothes.

"I t'ink," he said quietly, "that you be wan good *hombre*. I help you back to Monterey. An' you, my frien'," he turned and folded his arms on his breast, facing Tom Owsley, "you an' poor Eenjun, we go back!"

"That suits me," proclaimed Owsley boldly, although his hands were still trembling from the narrowness of his escape. "As soon as I c'n get a bit of rest in Monterey or somewhere's, we'll outfit an'——"

The face of the Indian at once became inplacable in its gathering harshness.

"We t'ree rest right here wan day more," he said authoritatively. "We start from here!"

A cry of protest rose from Owsley's lips.

"My God, man!" he objected. "It'd be suicide! Cain't you see my condition?"

The Indian shrugged and turned his back. Some yards away from there he disposed his body on the sand. Perhaps he slept, yet neither white man through the long night dared approach him. Mystified, unstrung with physical torture and

mental anguish, they finally drifted into a delirious sleep from which they were awakened by the increasing heat of the sun on their faces.

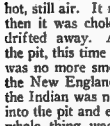
THROUGHOUT another day, human endurance, and the almost inextinguishable persistence of the life force, kept them alive. Neither white man made a move toward departing from the spot; a leaden weight in the bones telling them beyond all question that, in their enfeebled condition, all hope of braving the furnace-like heat of sun and sand was past. Already their mule had fallen; by noon he was dead. Two hours later the body was swelling.

To protect themselves from the sun they managed to rig up a low shelter with blankets; in its stifling shade they lay prone. All conversation had ceased.

To the fevered eyes of Elihu Slocum the figure of the Indian seemed like a figment of a delirious dream. Sometimes it came close and peered at him and Owsley; again it seemed to crawl on the desert sand on meaningless excursions.

There was a time when Slocum fancied the Indian was gathering a heap of dry sagebrush and greasewood, cutting it with a knife. Again it seemed that he was scooping a hollow pit in the sand. Still later he had lit a fire in the pit and seemed to be trying to smother it with a blanket.

A thin, blue column of smoke rose in the hot, still air. It rose like a stream of mist; then it was choked off at its base and it drifted away. Again smoke came from the pit, this time in a belching cloud. There was no more smoke. The torrid brain of the New Englander tried to conceive why the Indian was now throwing sand rapidly into the pit and extinguishing the fire. The whole thing was too fantastic to puzzle out; Slocum pressed his eyes with his fingers. The balls felt like glowing coals in burning sockets.



NIGHT again, out of an eternal inferno, bringing a coolness of air that no longer had the power to check the consuming heat that was burning out life in the vitals.

Once more the pale stars were out, the whitish moon rising. Night deepened and wore along interminably, and half consciously Slocum became aware of a new presence, something that had not been there before.

There was a mule, heavily packed. His eyes told him that his own animal was dead, not thirty feet away. Yet—this new animal was too real to be a phantom.

There was also a fourth person—a stranger—a woman. From out of his sultry stupor, Elihu Slocum, by a supreme effort of will, roused himself, and fought with all his powers for the return of his understanding—for his sanity.

The hushed voices of the Indian and the woman came to his ears. Owsley still lay prostrate, apparently lifeless. Slocum strained his ears. The talk was in Spanish; he could not understand it.

Painfully, he raised himself to an elbow, witnessed a passionate embrace and a parting. Straight into the desert the woman's figure was walking, in the direction of Monterey.

Slocum called to the Indian. Without a backward look at the woman the man took the mule's bridle and led it toward the rude shelter of the white men.

"There was someone here—a woman—" Slocum uttered the words vaguely from his parched throat.

The Indian was busy with the buckles of a strap that held the pack on the mule.

"Tink you that José Armandas de la Noregio ees too poor to own a sweetheart?" he asked, with a touch of pride. "My people," he said, "have not yet forgot to read smoke signals. Eendian girl ees smart enough to watch the sky."

In his arms the Indian lowered a burden to the ground. From a goatskin bag he poured water into a flask and handed it to Elihu Slocum.

"Dreenk slow," he advised.

Water first and then food. A heavenly satisfaction and then the flood of reviving life creeping like a healing balm through every fiber of being. There was beef and grain in the pack the woman had brought, a rifle with powder and lead, and two goatskins bursting with water.

"With thees I cross the sand ocean lak a leetle child playin' in a patio," the Indian assured the other two.

Tom Owsley, half restored to life, raised his skinny hands in protest.

"Don't make me do it!" he appealed. "I'll die afore a week. I need rest—rest—just rest."

The Indian laughed and there was a nasty rasp in his voice.

"You too tough to die so easy," he said. "You ride on top pack mule. I walk. Tomorrow we rest. We go find mooch gold. Now we start."

"It's suicide, I tell you!" Owsley all but screamed.

For the first time the Indian laughed aloud. It came from his throat in peals; it came mirthlessly in eerie, metalic cackles.

"Monterey! Monterey!" he shouted in a sweep of exultant fervor. "By the blessed saints I'll *buy* Monterey!"

Toward Elihu Slocum he threw a piece of dried beef and a metal flask containing water.

"Follow the path of the sun, my friend," he cried. "I'll buy you a house an' a hun'red slaves when I come back!"

A contagion of spirit touched Sam Owsley, a leaping fire of madness. He threw his ragged hat in the air and lifted his bearded face to the starry sky.

"Hurrah!" he shouted, hoarsely. "Hurrah! Hurrah!"

There was a sweep of arms; the Indian lifted Owsley and threw him astride the mule; he slapped the animal on the flank. Grotesquely, like ribald specters, they moved away slushing through the sand.

Elihu Slocum watched them with staring eyes; saw the Indian lifting a bottle to his lips. He knew it to be rum, drunken disregard of the first precept of desert travel.

Slocum picked up the water flask and the chunk of meat that had been left to him. It was miraculous, the way his strength had come back. Now, for the first time in weeks, the positive certainty of a safe return was upon him. In his long legs and sound heart still lived the stamina that would carry him the dozen or so miles to Monterey; to the life of commerce, of barter, and trade; to the safety and security that was an instinct and a heritage of his substantial New England soul.

He thought in a detached fashion of the gold that was escaping him. For a fragment of time he experienced a shuddering flash of the uncanny potency of the yellow metal. He had seen it obliterate the revenge lust of a natural killer of men; had witnessed it perverting all of Owsley's decency and intelligence. Quite mildly, as though it concerned him not at all, he wondered what the outcome of the renewed quest would be. His shrewdness told him in part; it would be murder and death far from civilization.

Elihu Slocum turned toward Monterey. For no accountable reason his hand wandered to the place inside his shirt where he had carried the bag of nuggets for so many weary miles. A strange emptiness met his touch. He found himself feeling his body and rubbing here and there to find a vanished weight.

A sense of loss, as bitter as gall, coursed through his body and centered in the pit of his stomach. Successive flushes of heat rushed over him in waves. Ten thousand nerves were tingling and jerking like fibers under his skin.

"My gold!" he heard himself crying in a voice of which he was no longer master.

Anger, white-hot, whipped seethingly across his mind.

"They'll get it all! They'll take it all and leave me none! It's *mine—mine—mine!*"

Hoarse, wordless shouts came from his blackened lips. He ran, shambling as a bear on two legs might run, after the retreating figures. He did not know how long he ran; he was conscious that he was cursing the Indian, cursing Owsley.

He was gaining ground on them when he saw through his bloodshot eyes that a rifle was being raised toward him. He could not tell whether it was Owsley or the Indian holding it.

"My gold!" he roared. "My——"

The crack of the rifle drowned his voice and Elihu Slocum collapsed slowly, cushioning his fall on the thick sands, as a gathering blackness obliterated the stinging pain of the bullet in his breast.

THE WAR WHISTLE

THE war-whistle of the Indians, made from the leg bone of turkey or deer, was from six to nine inches long, variously ornamented, and was really a double whistle, the two ends producing different notes. The shriller note was the signal for attack; the other, for retreat. It was carried by the chiefs or leading warriors, and it was usually slung around the neck on a leather thong. The war-whistles of the Pawnees and the Pawnee Picts became well known to the traders on the Old Santa Fe Trail, who heard them too often to find anything pleasing in the shriller notes.—C. E. M.

A WHITE MAN'S HERITAGE

By L. PATRICK GREENE

Author of "Three Thousand Acres" and "The Vanishing Spoor"

The Runt loved those three thousand acres of Rhodesian land which were his very own; loved and protected them, and stood ready to fight for them against both blacks and whites

THE Runt went to the door of his wattle-and daub hut and, leaning against a pole upright, sniffed the clean, sweet air appreciately.

"God, but it's good!" he exclaimed fervently. Then, buttoning his heavy coat closely about him, he walked briskly toward the small cattle *scherm* where a sleepy-eyed native was turning out the stock to graze.

"It is cold, Master," the native said, blowing on his numbed fingers. "Soon," he pointed to the eastern sky, where multi-colored streamers of light announced the ending of the long African night and the approach of a new day, "soon it will be very hot."

The Runt nodded. He was a silent man, rarely speaking save when the occasion demanded it and then only in short, curt sentences, speaking a dialect which was a composite of all the dialects of the world. Only when greatly excited, in anger or fear, did the Runt really talk, and at such times words burst from him in an impassioned flood that effectively drowned all opposition.

"There's only one way to stop the Runt blatting when he's got his monkey up," big Tim Marsden once said, "and that's to knock the little blighter cold. An' that's no easy job, let me tell you; he's hard as nails. He can handle his dukes, the little devil can, and look at his red hair, will you!"

It is probable that the Runt's flaming thatch, that and his single-track mind, go a long way toward explaining the situation in which he found himself; explains his ownership of a three thousand acre farm in the heart of a savage country which, only a few years before, was practically unknown to white men.

The career of Hercules Morton, the Runt, had been an epic of a sort. By sheer courage and steadfastness of purpose he had lifted himself out of the mire and slime of the big city slum in which he had grown up; had lifted himself much farther than mere physical prowess could have done. These had secured for him a berth with the Pioneer expedition into Rhodesia in 1889 and had earned him his three thousand acre farm—these and a great and overpowering desire for land, for great, wide, wind-swept spaces.

It was not that the Runt was far-seeing and realized that the future of the country was in its farm lands. He knew nothing about farming or cattle and cared less. He was only conscious that his life-long dream was to be fulfilled. He owned land, three thousand acres of it. It was wild and uncultivated; it was surrounded by thousands and thousands of acres of land just as wild and uncultivated; it was

the home of a savage, treacherous people who were the serfs of a savage and warlike race. The white men's claim to it was nebulous, their hold on it precarious. But none of this troubled the Runt.

It was land—land—and it was his.

The Runt's eyes glowed with the pride of ownership, and, as the cattle filed slowly out of the narrow opening in the pole-stockade, he slapped each beast lovingly on the flank.

"The count is thrice the fingers on your two hands, Sixpence," he said to the native herder, when the last beast had passed him. "Watch them carefully and see that they do not go beyond the borders of my land."

"Yes, Master," the native replied, grinning affectionately at the little, bandy-legged white man. Shouting raucously, he followed close on the heels of the cattle, driving them down the hillside to feed in the luxuriant, well-watered valley.

The Runt watched them pass out of sight and then went to the rudely-constructed shed, nearby, which served as a stable. Saddling the fat, sleepy-eyed horse, he mounted and rode slowly away, his hands thrust deep into his overcoat pocket, the reins hanging loosely on the horse's neck.

Presently he drew rein at the edge of a clearing in the center of which stood a small Mashona kraal. He sat for a while watching the natives who were grouped about a fire built before the largest hut. It was a peaceful scene. The women were preparing the food for the morning meal, the men gossiping, the children, blankets wrapped about their shoulders, sitting close to the fire, huddled together for the sake of warmth; the young girls were playing the game of *buholo*.

A smile passed across the Runt's face as he recalled the advice of an old-timer to clear the Mashonas off his land.

"They are treacherous devils," the old-timer had said. "If you let 'em stay they'll think it's because you're afraid of them and some night—" A hand drawn across the throat had ended the warning with a blood-curdling significance.

"The land was theirs before it was mine," the Runt had answered with a laugh, "an' I've got no right to turn 'em off. Besides, the little ground they want for their crops won't bother me none. But I'll talk to 'em like a Dutch uncle an' let 'em know what's what. Of course," he had added shrewdly, "they'll have to pay rent."

The Runt had talked to them like a Dutch Uncle, and the trend of his talk, his method of presentation, proved that he was one of the elect; that he intuitively understood the psychology of Africa's black children.

It happens that way sometimes. Many men spend a life time in South Africa and leave it knowing no more about it, or its people, than they did on the day of their arrival. But occasionally a man will arrive to whom the people, the country and its mysteries are like the pages of an open book which he can read with the greatest ease.

So the Runt had permitted the kraal to remain: in return the people of the kraal came to regard him as their overlord, paid rent to him in the form of labor and consulted him on all things affecting their welfare.

THE Runt's horse neighed loudly and the menfolk, conscious suddenly of the white man's presence, jumped to their feet and greeted him enthusiastically; naked picanninies broke away from the restraining hold of their mothers and ran toward him, tumbling over each other in their eagerness to be the first to reach him.

He looked down at them gravely, though there was a merry twinkle in his eyes.

"I was first, Master," said a sturdy boy of nine who had grabbed hold of the Runt's near stirrup, and he looked around triumphantly at the others.

The Runt nodded slowly.

"Yes. You are first, Kawiti, but you would not have been first had you not knocked down Mali. You were first because you are stronger than Mali, not because you are faster. Therefore to Mali goes the prize. Is it not just?"

"Yes, Master," the lad said slowly as he relinquished his hold on the stirrup to make way for the cross-eyed, long-legged Mali. "But tomorrow," he added triumphantly, "I shall be first because I am faster than all these others."

"You will make a great warrior," the Runt said approvingly. "In a little while I will make you my gunboy."

Then he gave to Mali a lump of hard rock candy and laughed as the children swarmed like bees about the happy prize winner.

A moment or two he sat watching them

and then called the men to him and gave them instructions regarding the clearing and tilling of a patch of ground. With the passing of time the Runt had come to see that land of itself was nothing, and he had the foresight to see that crops and not cattle were the mainstay of the country.

"Is it understood?" he concluded when he had finished his instructions.

"Yes, Master," they replied in chorus and the Runt, well satisfied, realizing that it was none of his business that his orders would be relayed to the women and that the men would not raise a hand to help in the work, rode on, allowing his horse to choose its own path.

On he rode; now following a winding path which led through thick bush, now crossing over a wide *vlei* where the grass grew thick, now skirting a twenty acre clearing where the corn crop showed the results of a white man's overseeing.

Coming at last to a small kopje which marked the center of his land, the Runt dismounted and, climbing the rock-strewn hill, rested finally on a large flat boulder and gazed about the surrounding country.

To the north, the south and the east there was nothing that betrayed man's presence. The kraal he had just left to the east was hidden by a clump of tall trees; his own huts and outbuildings were on the other side of a gentle rise still further to the east.

The Runt breathed deeply, finding it all good; his eyes sparkled, his lips parted lightly.

It was growing warm now, and the little man took off his coat and unbuttoned his gray flannel shirt at the neck.

A dull *thud-thud* suddenly sounded above the noises of the bush; it continued with a devastating regularity. All joy left the Runt's face as, scowling, he turned to the west, where about five miles distant, a collection of tin-roofed shacks stood in the center of a barren, ugly waste. They were, he knew, the buildings of the Robin gold mine and the dull *thud-thud* was the noise made by the two-stamp mill as it pulverized the hard quartz.

The Runt shook his fist angrily, then resolutely turned his back, slowly descended the hill, mounted and rode on again.

This early morning ride about his domain had become a sort of sacred ritual with him. It was an expression of his great land love and in no way comparable to a miser's greedy counting of his wealth. The land had come to be as much a part of himself as his hands or his heart, but he had no desire to keep it all to himself, undeveloped, unproductive. On these rides he would dream great dreams and make great plans which would, in the fullness of time, make of his three thousand acres a "paradise for poor devils, like I was, who'd never seen land that was land."

Because he was very observant, the Runt got to know his land intimately; as intimately as a man gets to know the expressions and gestures of his dearest friend. He knew every tree and jumble of rocks; he knew all the game paths and the hours at which the beasts of the bush quenched their thirst; he knew the lair of a hill leopard, and a branch, overhanging a water-hole, which was the favorite ambush of a mighty python. He allowed them all to live—the leopard and python, the various species of buck and fowl which swarmed through the bush. The Runt was no hunter.

The Runt allowed nothing to interfere with his morning ride. It was a proper beginning, the only beginning, of his day. Once he had started out from his hut his eyes unnaturally bright, his face flushed, his teeth chattering with the ague of fever.

The native, Sixpence, had found him late that night lying prone on the flat boulder which topped the kopje, patting the ground about him caressingly and babbling deliriously.

The Runt would have died then, for he frantically resisted the attempts of Sixpence to carry him down the kopje to his horse and so home, had not the native built a large fire, erected a shelter of brush over him and tended him carefully through the long night; sponging him with lukewarm water, forcing him to drink a steaming hot concoction which looked like the green scum that floats on the top of a stagnant pool and smelled like bilge.

The Runt laughed now as he thought of the shock he had experienced when full consciousness had come to him in the morning. There he was, covered with a foul-smelling *kaross*, on the top of the kopje, and, bending over him, was Sixpence, blear-eyed from his long vigil, holding a gourd of pungent smelling liquid to his lips.

For a moment the thought had flashed through the Runt's mind that the warnings of the men at the settlement were justified and that Sixpence had brought him here to poison him, to offer him as a sacrifice to some heathen deity. He had put out his hand to thrust the gourd vio-

lently away from him, and then his eyes had met Sixpence's. He had hesitated a moment and then, taking the gourd with his two hands, the Runt put it to his lips and drained it, gagged slightly, then looked at Sixpence and chuckled.

"We will go now," the native had said. "But next time the fever takes hold of master he must remain in his hut. What if the Spotted One had found the master?"

The white men at the settlement had scoffed when the Runt had told them of that insance of a Mashona's loyalty.

THE Runt rode on, occasionally drawing rein that he might better appreciate a distant view, or to pat the trunk of a gigantic tree. Once he dismounted and drank his fill at a tiny spring which bubbled out of a jumble of rocks, and then paused to watch two duiker which were grazing contentedly nearby. When he clapped his hands they looked up inquisitively, their little nostrils working frantically to catch the scent. Then one of them saw him and advanced a few paces, then snorted an alarm. The next moment they had vanished and not even the Runt's keen eyes detected the manner of their going.

Chuckling softly the Runt mounted; and at that moment the sharp crack of a rifle broke the stillness.

The Runt swore angrily and, drumming his heels on the ribs of his horse, galloped lumberingly in the direction of the shot.

He came presently to a narrow *spruit* on the opposite side of which a man stooped over the body of the duiker he had just shot. He was skinning it, and so engrossed was he with his task that he did not look up until the Runt had forded the stream, dismounted and was striding wrathfully toward him.

"How do!" the stranger then said cheerfully, giving his heavy black mustache a twirl with his blood-stained fingers, and squirting a yellow stream of tobacco juice in the path of the advancing Runt. "Seat yourself and have a chin." Then, as he met the Runt's angry gaze, he straightened himself and let his hand drop to the butt of his revolver.

"What are you doin' here?" the Runt asked harshly.

The other shrugged his shoulders and looked down contemptuously at the little man.

"I like to know the name of the man who's talking to me—specially when he talks the way you do. Mine's Thomas."

"Mine—not that it makes any diff'runce—is Morton. What——"

"Oh, the Runt, eh?" The other slapped his thighs with his huge, ham-like hands. "I've heard of you."

"Then yuh ought to know I don't allow no shootin' on my land."

"But a man's got to eat, Runt," the other protested in mock humility.

"I'm alus willin' to give a sundowner a bed for the night an' enough grub to carry him on to the settlement."

"But I ain't going on, Runt," the man expostulated in amused tones. "I'm going to stay here for a little while an' prospect—see?"

He leered provocatively and jerked his thumb in the direction of a nearby clump of bush. The Runt noticed for the first time the prospector's tent and the camp equipment which was piled on the ground about it. A little beyond the tent were four mules, hobbled, standing listlessly in the shade, swishing their tails constantly in an effort to rid themselves of the swarm of flies which clustered about them.

The Runt's eyes returned to the prospecting tools.

"I don't allow no prospectin' on my land," he said slowly.

"You don't, eh? Well, now, think of that. But here's your land and here's me, Buck Thomas. And old Buck's going to do a little prospecting right here. Now, what are you going to do about that?"

The Runt dismounted carefully from his horse.

"Why," he said thoughtfully, "I'm goin' to kick yer off—that's all."

Thomas flung back his head and laughed raucously.

"Now look here, Runt," he said, sobering suddenly, "there's no call for you to act like this. Don't be a fool, man. How do you think you're going to do that, eh? You don't stand more than five foot six in high-heeled boots, nor weigh more than 130 pounds. Now me!" He laughed as he stretched himself out to his full height, expanded his chest and flexed his arm muscles. "And you don't carry a gun, do you?" He swiftly scrutinized the Runt. "No, of course not. Well then, as I said before, don't be a damned fool."

"Are you goin' to get off my land quietly, or do I have to put yuh off?" The Runt rolled up his sleeves as he spoke, disclosing forearms which looked almost de-

formed in comparison with his small stature.

"Now look here, Runt, there's no need for you to start acting rash," Thomas said hastily, viewing the little man's belligerent preparations with inward qualms. He had no liking for fist-fights, not even when, as now, he was confident of victory. Blows hurt, specially when they had the driving force of a powerful forearm like the Runt's behind them. "Let's talk this over quietly," he urged.

"There ain't nothing to talk over." The Runt's tone was very positive.

"Oh, yes, there is. Look a-here." He sat down on a boulder and motioned the Runt to sit beside him.

"Talking's a waste of time," the Runt growled. "But go on; have yer say, only, if it's all the same to you, I'll sit here where I can watch yuh."

He squatted native-fashion on his haunches opposite Thomas.

"Perhaps you don't know it," the big prospector continued presently, "but somewhere about here there's a rich reef, richer than that of the Robin mine, yonder. How do I know? Why their manager told me about it at the settlement the other day. Simkins was drunk on whiskey I'd bought for him, and he talked a lot. Course they're not sure that you've got a reef here; they haven't located it yet, and all they've got to go on is an incomplete report turned in by one of their engineers just before he kicked the bucket. But they're sure enough to know what they want; they want this farm of yours, and, you can gamble your last shilling, they're going to get it. I'll tell a man they will. They're trying to work it so as the mining rights of it'll belong to them; and then where'll you be?"

"But they can't do that," the Runt exclaimed, frightened a little out of his reserve. "This land's mine. I've got the deeds, an' I've done all the improvements—an' more—that I was supposed to do. An'—an'—I got the deeds," he concluded lamely.

"Yes. And a fat lot they'll help you. That syndicate's got a lot of money back of 'em. A lot of the big bugs on the London Stock Exchange—" Thomas was drawing now on his fertile imagination—"own shares in the Robin syndicate and they won't take a back seat just because you get up and talk. You can't talk high and mighty to them. Of course, if you took the case to court you'd win out in the end, maybe. That is, if you had enough money to see the thing through to the end. You haven't—and they have, and you can take it from me that they'll take this place of yours and do just what they damned well please with it. Why, Runt, if they happened to strike a gold reef right under your hut, they could kick you out of it. A man's home ain't his castle in this country. You can bet your bottom shilling on that."

The Runt was silent. He felt that his position was decidedly insecure, that his hold on the land was only tentative. Then he remembered his friends on the Pioneer force and his face brightened. They would see to it that he got a square deal. Just the same, he wished that he could remember just what was the clause in his deeds that concerned mining rights.

"Now I'll tell you what," Thomas went on confidently, not noticing the Runt's change of expression. "You being what you are and me being what I am, I'm going to prospect here—with your permission, or without it. See? But I'll be generous with you. I like to have everything square and above board. You give me the right to prospect on your land and develop it as I see fit, give me niggers to work for me, and I'll give you ten per cent. on all takings. What say?"

THE Runt stooped over, picked up a stone and flicked it in the direction of a vulture which was perched on a nearby tree, greedily eyeing the carcass of the duiker Thomas had shot.

"Well, what say?" Thomas repeated impatiently. "Ten per cent. of all proceeds. Take it or leave it."

The Runt slowly raised his eyes to Thomas'.

"I'm leavin' it," he said shortly.

"I'll give you fifteen—no, twenty-five per cent."

The Runt shook his head.

"Fifty then. Hell—that's more than generous. That's philanthropy. I do all the work, give you the benefit of my experience, take all the risk——"

"Risk?" There was a world of scorn in the Runt's voice. "You take risk? You wouldn't dare take no more risk than that vulture there. All you can do is go round lookin' for easy pickin's. A damned offal snatcher, that's what you are."

"Look a-here," Thomas bellowed wrathfully. "Don't you be so blinking personal

in your remarks. I won't stand for it, see? If you say much more I'll bash your face in." Then he suddenly changed his tone, a little taken aback by the Runt's fearless attitude. "Listen; there's no call for us to fall out. We ought to be good pals, Runt. We can both be rich if we work together. You sell me the mining rights to your land for sixty per cent. of the proceeds and I'll register the deal right away. That'll keep the Robin mine people away from you."

The Runt rose determinedly to his feet. "No," he said flatly. "I ain't interested. You'd better start a-packin' yer stuff."

Thomas looked at the little man in blank amazement. His last offer, taken at its face value, was not a bad one, and the Runt could not possibly guess the artful clause he planned to write into the agreement which would make the Runt's claims null and void. Thomas was a past master of the gentle art of composing contracts in which jokers were cleverly ambushed.

"But, you little fool," Thomas expostulated, "don't you see you're missing out on an opportunity for making a big pile? Why, you could go to London or New York and do the sights up brown. Why, if we locate a reef that's only a tenth as good as the Robin, you'd be able to cover the dresses of all the chorus beauties with hundred dollar bills. Think of that, Runt. Why, when they see you standing on the gold pile you'll own, they'll forget you're only five foot and a spit. Think of the big cities—London, New York, Paris——"

"Yes. I'm thinkin' of 'em," the Runt interposed wearily, "an' they fair make me sick. What the hell's gold, or women, or cities to me? I wouldn't give an acre of my land for the whole damn' city of New York an' all what's in it. An' do yuh think I'll let yuh mine on my land—a-gettin' the niggers drunk, an' killin' the animals an' birds, an' a-hewin' down my trees to make props fer your dirty tunnels. Get out!"

He advanced a few paces, standing quite close to Thomas, who had to raise his eyes slightly to meet the Runt's. For a few moments the mild, but unwavering blue eyes looked into shifty black ones.

Presently Thomas rose to his feet, his face flushed red with wrath, his chin thrust out pugnaciously, his thumbs hooked over the heavy cartridge belt about his waist.

He seemed to be endeavoring to crush the Runt by the mere threat of his physical superiority. When that failed he cleared his throat with a harsh, dry cough; then he broke out into a stream of foul epithets and threats.

"And I'm going to prospect here just as long as I like," he finished up. "So what are you going to do about that? I'll blast where I please, shoot anything I've a mind to, and camp wherever it suits my fancy. If I find a pocket of nuggets, so much the better for me. If I discover the reef the Robin people are after I'll dicker with them; if I discover nothing, I'll come and take it out of your hide. And you, you little——"

What else he would have added was checked by the Runt's whirlwind attack. Head down, his arms working in and out like pistons, the Runt closed in on the big man, getting in four smashing blows under the heart and retreating out of range before the big prospector could make a move to defend himself.

For a moment he stared stupidly at the prancing Runt; then, with a bull-like roar, he rushed forward, endeavoring to come to close quarters.

It was not to his credit that he did not draw his revolver. He was not at all squeamish: a murder would not have weighed at all heavily on his conscience, as long as he was sure that the crime could not be brought home to him. He was not at all sure now. Natives might be watching from some nearby hiding-place; the Runt's custom of going about his farm unarmed was too well known for Thomas to shoot and then make a plea of self-defense; neither would his reputation stand the close investigation which would follow the shooting of a man like the Runt. The members of the Pioneer force were still idealized by the settlers. But more than anything else, perhaps, Thomas was influenced by the confident assurance of being able to deal with the Runt more than efficiently with his bare fists. He was positive of his ability to bruise and maim the little man, to break his spirit, to batter him into helpless insensibility.

SO HE rushed at the Runt, his arms swinging like flails, grunting loudly, his eyes narrowed to vicious slits.

The Runt gave ground before the prospector's attack, not bothering now to do any attacking but concerning himself solely in keeping out of the way.

"Stand still, damn you!" Thomas roared,

halting himself and rocking back and forth on his toes.

The Runt's answer was to rush in again, deliver four more of his piston-like blows in the region of Thomas' belt-line and then break away again. Each blow extracted a loud grunting gasp from Thomas and set his arms swinging even more wildly.

Again the Runt retreated, cautiously, reserving his strength, taunting the big man to a blind, unreasoning anger, darting in again at every opportunity and getting home his one—two—three—four.

It was like an impudent little town sparrow tormenting an overfed, bullying crow.

Presently the Runt closed in, snatched the prospector's revolver from its holster and tossed it into the spruit. This act weakened Thomas' confidence of ultimate victory. The revolver had been his ace in the hole; he knew that he could stop this farcial fight at any moment by drawing his gun and getting the drop on the Runt.

Now his revolver was gone, and the fact that the Runt had disdained to use it himself gave the big prospector something to think about. Once possessed of the revolver, why hadn't the Runt held him up?

Thomas was panting loudly; every breath hurt, and he felt that his middle had been punched into one big open wound.

"Have you had enough?" he gasped.

The Runt laughed.

"You ain't touched me yet. Now, watch out, blast yuh, I'm goin' to kick yuh off my land."

He closed in again, overbold and a little careless— and ran into a terrific blow, a wild uppercut which started in the region of Thomas' knees. Back went the little man's head with a snap and he reeled and fell.

Thomas looked at him in triumph for a moment and then rushed. But that moment's hesitation lost Thomas the opportunity of ending the fight, for the Runt rolled over and bounded to his feet just in time to avoid the vicious kick the other launched at his ribs.

The Runt was groggy, but he had learned his lesson and for a time he carefully kept away from the anger-mad prospector, dodging behind bushes and trees, twisting to the right and to the left, resting whenever Thomas paused his savage chase to shout obscene threats. Quickly the Runt's strength was coming back to him; the life he had been leading kept him in perfect condition, enabled him to throw off the affect of Thomas' stunning blow. Thomas, on the other hand, was weakening visibly; his soft, flabby stomach muscles could not withstand the Runt's rapid-fire blows.

He sat down suddenly on a large boulder and with a great show of nonchalance filled and lighted his pipe. The Runt leaned against a tree trunk and watched him.

"I—ain't a-going—to run—after you—any more," the big man gasped between puffs. "I can—get you—any time I want. And get you good. But what's the use. I'm a-going to stay here and—prospect and you—if you're wise—you'll keep away from me."

The Runt was nonplussed for a moment. He knew that his only hope of victory rested in making the big man carry the fight to him.

Then he chuckled softly and picked up a handful of stones.

He flicked one at Thomas. It struck the big man on the shin and he cursed vehemently until another stone hit him on the cheek, cutting it slightly. Then he bounded up with a roar and rushed at the Runt, who led him a wild chase—across the muddy spruit and back again, through thick bush and over smooth, slippery rocks.

Half-blinded by the sweat which poured down his face, Thomas rolled now in his gait and he breathed through wide-open mouth. Finally, his foot catching in a tangle of grass, he stumbled and fell headlong with a dull thud. When he rose groggily to his feet he saw the Runt standing very close to him. He blundered forward, hitting out blindly.

This time the Runt did not retreat. He no longer feared the big man's wild blows. They could still hurt, but their knock-out menace had evaporated.

One—two—three—four.

The Runt's blows followed fast on one another. The big man gave ground; he ceased to fight back; he began to cover up.

One—two—three—four.

Thomas crouched, his hands held low, endeavoring to keep his stomach out of range of those torturing blows. Low and lower he crouched, his head thrust forward.

The Runt swiftly changed his attack.

One—two!

Both blows landed flush on Thomas' chin. They staggered him and he stumbled forward.

The Runt sidestepped as Thomas blundered by him, then hit the prospector with all his force behind the ear.

WHEN Thomas recovered consciousness he looked up into the eyes of the Runt.

"What—" he began, and then he remembered, sat up and gingerly fingered his jaw.

"What," he began again, "did you hit me with?"

"My fist," the Runt answered briefly. "Now get up and get out."

Thomas rose groaningly to his feet, a malicious light in his eyes. He was not beaten yet. Once let him get hold of his rifle; then he saw that the Runt had secured the weapon and was holding it in a business-like way.

He turned and saw with surprise that all his camp equipment had been packed and loaded on the mules. Slowly he walked over to them and drove them along a path which led out of the Runt's property toward the Robin mine.

The Runt followed closely behind, his fingers on the trigger of the rifle, watching Thomas very carefully.

At the boundary line of his farm the Runt halted.

"I'm keepin' your gun as a keepsake," he said. "I'll give yuh a bullet from it if yuh come here again. If I was you, I wouldn't come."

Thomas looked round and, wiping the blood from his cut lips with the back of his hairy hands, swore venomously.

"I'll be back," he concluded thickly, then turned and hastened after his mules.

The Runt watched him until he had passed out of sight, then returned to the scene of the fight, mounted his horse and resumed his tour of inspection. But he rode mechanically now, seeing nothing. His forehead was puckered with lines of worry. He was wondering just how much credence he could place in the statement of Thomas that the Robin mine people were planning to steal his land from him.

Hardly had he passed out of sight when the native, Sixpence, holding fast to the ear of the boy, Kawiti, descended from the branches of a large tree.

"Keep still, little fool," Sixpence said good-humoredly. "The master will hear you."

"I don't care," the boy stormed. "He shall hear many things. I will tell him how you kept hidden in the tree when he fought with that pig of a white man. And I will tell him how you would not let me go to help him. Coward! Dog!"

Sixpence chuckled.

"You do not know the master. He would have beaten you had you gone to him. It is not well to meddle in the *indaba* of white men. But truly, Kawiti, no man can call you a coward."

"But once you were going to his help," Kawiti said, slightly mollified.

"True," Sixpence said gravely, remembering the time the Runt was on the ground. "But there was no need, as you saw. The master has the cunning of a snake and the heart——"

"Of a lion," Kawiti supplemented quickly.

"True. Now let us skin the buck the other white man shot for us. Then we must get back to the herd."

Swiftly he completed the task commenced by Thomas, grumbling at the evidences of that man's lack of skill, Kawiti watching him intently.

WHEN the Runt got back to his living-quarters later that morning, he found Trooper Tom Purvis of the Mounted Police lounging outside one of the huts.

The two men were old friends, dating back to the time of the Pioneers' great trek and had not seen each other for over a year. They greeted each other casually.

"'Lo, Runt!"

"How do, Tom."

The policeman looked curiously at the Runt's face; one eye was almost closed up and his right cheek was bruised.

"What have you been doing, Runt? Mixing it up with a lion?"

The Runt grinned.

"No. Just been showing a chap the quickest way to get off my land."

"I've heard a lot about these personally conducted tours of yours, Runt. Who was it this time?" Purvis chuckled.

"A bloke named Thomas — Buck Thomas. Know 'im?"

"Yes. He's a hog. Nothing too dirty for him to handle. How many of your blacks did it take to run him off?"

"None. I did it meself."

"You did?" Purvis closed one eye skeptically, then added softly, "And damned if I don't believe you, you blamed little red-headed runt. What started it? Same old story, I suppose?"

The Runt nodded.

"He wanted to prospect an' I wouldn't let him. I own the minin' rights of my land, don't I?"

"Of course." Purvis looked sharply at the little man. "You ought to know that. The only tag on it is, if you locate a reef and work it, or if you find any nuggets or anything like that, you have to pay the B. S. A. Co., a big fat percentage. That's all. See?"

"You're sure of that?"

"Positive. Why don't you read your deed papers?"

"I 'ave. But I skipped the parts about minin'. They don't interest me."

"They wouldn't," Purvis commented caustically. "You're a funny chap."

They smoked in silence for a little while and then the Runt asked, "You're goin' ter stay a few days, eh, Tom?"

Purvis shook his head.

"No. Can't waste any time; been here too long as it is. Got to patrol the whole district in double-quick time."

The Runt was disappointed. Purvis was one of the few men who understood and sympathized with his attitude toward land, and although he would never admit it, the Runt got very lonel, at times.

"What are yer after?" he asked.

Purvis knocked the ashes from his pipe and rose hurriedly.

"They're having trouble down-country and there's rumors afloat that the Mashonas are planning to go out. Anyway, I'm to warn all settlers to get into the fort at Salisbury as soon as possible. Better pack up and move in, Runt, till it all blows over."

The Runt snorted contemptuously.

"An' leave my land just because a big, fat bug, who never stirs outside his office, gets the wind up him. Like hell I will—not. You chaps in the police are always talkin' about rebellions."

"Well," Purvis said slowly, "a party of Mashonas wiped out a settler and his wife and kids down Hartley way. Men who know figure that's just a preliminary to a general uprising."

"Maybe." The Runt was far from convinced. "Anyway, I'm goin' ter stay 'ere."

"I expected you would," Purvis commented dryly. "You're a fool, you know, Runt. But when the Mashonas cut your eyelids off and peg you out on top of an ant hill with a gob of honey on your naked chest—don't say you weren't warned. S'long, Runt."

"S'long, Tom. Drop in on yer way back."

"Sure I will, Runt." Purvis hesitated a moment and then added apologetically, "Say, Runt, the Robin mine manager won't leave, either. Talked just like you did."

"Course he wouldn't leave," the Runt said bitterly. "Gold—that's all the greedy hog thinks of."

Purvis laughed.

"But his men all are going to clear out. They started to pack up as soon as I gave 'em the warning. And, Runt—don't get mad now—old Simkins is coming to see you today. He wants to talk business with you and I promised I'd get you to listen to him."

"Oh, I'll listen to him!" the Runt's voice was harsh. "I'll——"

"No. No rough stuff, Runt," Purvis interrupted. "Promise!"

"All right," resignedly.

Purvis vaulted into the saddle, raised his hand in salute, rode away a few paces, then halted.

"There's one other thing, Runt," he said awkwardly. "If this rebellion does break out before I get back—Listen! They may be drumming the signal for it now for all you know."

He raised his hand, checking the Runt's jeering reply. A low, monotonous drumming could be heard above the noises of the bush.

"All right," the Runt said soberly. "I won't laugh. What was it yuh wanted me to do?"

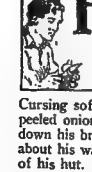
"There's a girl at the Robin—old Simkins' daughter—we are going to get married soon. Don't let the natives—" He stopped, confused.

"All right," the Runt growled. "I'll take care of 'er. But you're a fool to worry about the blacks— And," explosively, "a bigger fool to get married."

Purvis laughed relievedly, waved his hand gaily and spurred rapidly away.

"Now, what do yuh think of that," the Runt murmured. "The blamed fool believes there's goin' to be a rebellion an' yet he goes an' pokes his nose into danger just to warn a few fools like me and that hog at the mine yonder. It ain't as if he could do any good, either. If the blacks are planning to go out, they'll stick him afore he gets far."

The Runt entered his hut to wash up and get things looking shipshape for the expected visit of Simkins, the manager of the Robin mine.



HE CAME, with his daughter, much sooner than the Runt expected.

The little man was peeling onions in the cook hut when the patter of hoofs announced the arrival of visitors. Cursing softly, knife in one hand, a half-peeled onion in the other, tears streaming down his bruised cheeks, a sack apron tied about his waist, the Runt went to the door of his hut.

His appearance was greeted by a low, musical laugh and a deep, "Haw! Haw!"

The Runt scowled, conscious of the comical figure he made standing there: half blinded by the swelling of one eye, the juice of the onion and the bright, slanting rays of the sun.

He tossed the onion and knife behind him into the hut, took off the apron and then, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hands, advanced truculently.

"What are yuh laughin' at?" he demanded angrily.

The Runt did not look at the girl. He didn't like women—was half afraid of them; besides, this one had succeeded in making a fool of his friend Purvis.

The man sobered quickly, but it was the girl who answered.

"Oh, please forgive us, Mr. Morton. Only, you did look funny, you know."

The Runt glanced at her then quickly looked away. Inwardly commenting. "Tom picked a good looker," he turned again to the man.

"Well, what do yuh want?"

"I thought I'd try once again to get on friendly terms with you, Morton. We're neighbors and—and white men ought to stick together, specially if this talk of an uprising's true."

"It may be at that," the Runt commented briefly. "Best get inter the fort. That's my advice to you."

Simkins shook his head.

"No; I'm sticking by the mine and Ruth's sticking with me. I tried to send her away, but she won't go." He glanced proudly at her.

"You're blamed fools, then."

"The men are leaving this afternoon——"

"They're damned fools," the Runt said crisply. "An' that leaves you and your girl all alone with the blacks, eh?"

Simkins nodded.

"Well, if the rebellion breaks, you an' her had better come on over to my place. See? My blacks won't go out."

"That's white of you, Morton. Only, I think it would be better for you to come over to the mine and help protect that. There's nothing here for the natives to spoil—" he waved his hand disparagingly —"but they could do a lot of damage to some very valuable machinery at the mine and——"

"I hopes they knock it all to bits if they do go out!" the Runt exclaimed vindictively. Then, in quieter tones, remembering the promise he made to Purvis, "But that ain't all yuh came to see me about, is it?"

"Well—no. But suppose we off-saddle and sit down somewhere and talk things over quietly."

"I can talk here," the Runt said stolidly. "Go on. Say what's on your mind.

The manager looked at his daughter, a puzzled frown on his face.

"You're not very courteous, Morton," he said at length in curt tones. "My daughter——"

"I'm all right, Father," she interposed hastily. "I think Mr. Morton's quite right. It's pleasant out here and it would be foolish to go inside. What a wonderful view you have, Mr. Morton."

The Runt looked at her covertly. He liked the way her short, black hair curled closely about her well-shaped head. She seemed very young and boyish sitting confidently astride her big, bony horse.

"Well, talk business," he said to her father.

Simkins bridled. Except for very infrequent lapses, when he drank well but not wisely, he took himself very seriously and all matters pertaining to business had to be approached according to ritual. The Runt's directness rather disconcerted him. He endeavored to meet bluntness with bluntness.

"How much do you want for the mining rights of your land?"

"They ain't for sale."

"Don't be a fool, man. Don't you see that your obstinacy is standing in the way of the country's development?"

"An' a good job, too, I call it, if by development yuh mean diggin' and blastin' great big holes in the ground, and cuttin' down trees, and bringin' a lot of gold-mad thugs into the country. But you can't touch my land: that's final. It ain't for sale."

The Runt turned to reënter his hut.

"You talk like a damned fool, Morton,"

the mine manager exclaimed peevishly. "You've got no sense of values. Don't you understand that gold is the foundation of our civilization?"

"It ain't neither. Land is."

Simkins waved aside the Runt's interruption.

"And don't you see, Morton," he continued, "that you're losing a chance of striking it rich and then——"

"You're wasting your breath, mister. I keep my land as it is. An' that's all I've got to say to yuh. I promised Purvis I'd listen to what yuh had to say. I have kept my word—and that's all there is to it."

"No, you're wrong," Simkins exploded wrathfully. "You can't put me off that way."

He was over-zealous, perhaps, in working for the interests of his employers. Also he was considering his own, and his daughter's, welfare. The Robin reef was almost played out, would have to be closed down in a year or two, and he would be out of a job. But, if he could locate a reef on the Runt's land, everything would be all right. The expense of moving the machinery and equipment would be comparatively small.

"You can't put me off that way," he repeated. "Who in hell do you think you are to stand in the way of progress? If there's gold on your land—and I'm sure there is—I'm going to prospect for it. It ought to be worked. You're acting like a dog in the manger. Why, you half-starved little guttersnipe——"

"Father!" the girl cried reproachfully, and, reining her horse over closer to his, she laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Good day to you both," said the Runt. Entering the hut, he slammed the door behind him.

The voices of the girl and her father sounded in hot argument.

"We'll make things so hot for you, Morton," Simkins then shouted, "that you'll go down on your knees and beg us to buy your mining rights."

The Runt smiled but made no reply.

There followed a silence, broken presently by the jingle of bit and the patter of horse's hooves. Again silence, and then a timid knock at the door. The Runt opened it and saw the girl standing there. He scowled fiercely.

"I'm sorry father acted that way," she began hesitatingly. "But he didn't mean all he said, and he really does believe that the future of the country depends on its gold output."

"He's a damned fool, then!"

She smiled faintly.

"At least we can be friends, can't we?"

The Runt mumbled something under his breath and fidgeted uneasily. Then his face softened; he furtively rubbed the palm of his right hand on his trousers, then grasped the one she held out to him. He marveled at its softness; he was astonished at the firmness of its grip.

"And you and father must be friends, too," the girl continued. "Perhaps," she laughed merrily, "father will be able to persuade you that gold is the only thing; or——"

She was going to add, "or you persuade father that land is much more important."

But she had no chance to finish her sentence.

With an oath the Runt turned away from her, and the banging of his hut door again put an effective end to all conversation.

Puzzled, not a little hurt, the girl mounted and rode hastily after her father.

"Blast her," the Runt thought as he donned his apron and savagely attacked another onion. "She's no better than all the rest. She thought she could soft-soap me out of my land, did she!"

THAT night it rained hard and the next morning, when the Runt went down to the cattle *scherm* he found Sixpence gazing stupidly at the carcass of one of the oxen. Its throat had been cut and there was nothing to show who had been guilty of the infamous deed. The Runt did not want signs or evidences of any kind. He knew! Simkins, the gold man, was living up to his threat.

Cursing savagely, the Runt ran back to his hut, buckled on his revolver, then saddled his horse and rode swiftly toward the Robin mine.

By the time he reached the boundary of his land, however, his temper had cooled somewhat. He pulled his horse to a halt and sat for a while, his brows knit in thought.

"That ain't the way to do it," he muttered finally. "If I killed him, I'd have to kill the girl too; an' I couldn't do that. They'd string me up, and that wouldn't do me any good. No; I got a better plan than that."

He turned his horse and rode slowly back to his huts. He was going to watch closely and have the men of the kraal

watch, too. He was going to catch Simkins in the act. And then—

The Runt rode about his farm all that day and that night kept watch close to the cattle *scherm*. Toward early morning Sixpence came running to tell him that one of the huts at the kraal was on fire.

Believing that the fire had been set by the same hand that had killed one of his oxen, the Runt went hastily to the kraal, arriving just in time to see the roof of the burning hut collapse, sending a shower of sparks and burning brands in all directions. The Runt was kept busy until long after sunrise directing the efforts of the natives to keep the fire from spreading to the other huts.

When, at last, he considered it safe to leave them and return to his own huts, tired and fire-scorched, Sixpence took him down to the cattle *scherm* and pointed mutely to another dead beast.

The Runt cursed and raved for nearly half an hour, walking excitedly up and down, shaking his fist in the direction of the Robin mine.

He sobered suddenly and all that day worked hard about the cattle *scherm*, making and setting man-traps.

"They'll fix him," he said with grim satisfaction when the last trap was set and he sat down in the shade of a tree to view his handiwork.

Presently he looked up to see a native approaching bearing a letter in the cleft of a forked stick. It was from Simkins, and the Runt had difficulty in deciphering the mine manager's crabbed handwriting. Slowly he read:

Dear Morton:

I'm sorry I was such a fool the other day. I hear you're having trouble. Perhaps it's the beginning of the rebellion. My native laborers have all deserted—all except the one I'm sending to you with this note. Better come back with him.

Robert Simkins.

P. S. How about selling us the mining rights of your land?

The Runt swore savagely and tore the note into little pieces, flinging them into the face of the messenger, who gave a wild yell and bolted. He thought the little man had suddenly gone mad.

Until the Runt read the postcript, he had been ready to believe that he had judged too hastily in concluding that Simkins was responsible for the burning of the hut and the killing of his cattle. But now!

He kept close watch again that night, resolved that nothing should lure him away. And, though he was curious to know the cause of the wild singing and beating of drums which came from the kraal during the early hours of the night, he did not move from his post.

His vigil was unrewarded but, at least, his oxen were safe.

"Keep close watch over them, Sixpence," he ordered the native next morning. "Do not let them out of the *scherm*. There is an evil one about."

"There is much evil about, Master," Sixpense said gravely. "Look!" He pointed in the direction of the Robin mine, where a red glow lined the gray of dawn.

"What is it? Is it the mine?" the Runt cried exultantly.

Sixpence nodded.

The Runt sobered quickly.

"Then," he stammered, "the rebellion's on. The Mashonas have gone out against the white men?"

"Yes, Master. My people are angry at the whites. They would rather have the old days. The Matabele only raided us occasionally, but the white men are with us all the time. They wander everywhere and frighten away the game; they destroy the breeding places of the field rats; their pigs root up our wild fruits—and what is there left for us to eat? Before the white men came there was food in plenty. But now the locusts are with us and eat up the crops. *Au-a!* Also the white men have cast a plague on our cattle. They—" Sixpence stopped and looked at the white man sorrowfully. "That is what my people believe, Master," he added shamefacedly.

"An' so do you," the Runt said sagely in English. "Don't know as I blame yuh, at that. Us whites are fair muckers, take us by and large." Then, in the vernacular, "And are my people, the people of my kraal, going out too?"

"They have already gone, Master. Not one is left at the kraal. Last night they went, after the drum talk."

The Runt whistled dolefully.

"And what are you going to do, Sixpence?"

"When I have brought water and feed to the cattle, Master, then I go too. I shall not see the master again until this *indaba* is over.

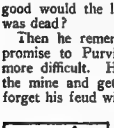
"And you, Master, you will go to the fort, quickly? It may even now be too late, but if you will go quickly— Here it

is not safe. There has been no killing hereabouts yet; only the buildings were burned at the mine. When the word goes out to kill the men and women of the kraal will forget that you were their friend and I will forget that you are my master. You will go to the fort?"

The Runt shook his head sadly and walked slowly away.

Entering his sleeping-hut the Runt sat moodily on the cot bed and considered his situation. He decided finally to act on Sixpence's advice and ride to the fort, a three days' trek away. The rebellion would be squashed—that was sure—and, after it was all over, the land would still be here. But if he took fool chances and stayed—what good would the land be to him when he was dead?

Then he remembered the girl and his promise to Purvis. That made matters more difficult. He'd have to go over to the mine and get her, and he'd have to forget his feud with her father.



A WILD yell disturbed the stillness. It was followed by a shot; then silence again.

Rushing out, the Runt saw two bodies lying prone on the ground near the cattle *scherm*.

Coming to them, he saw that one was a white man. An assegai was sticking out of his back. The Runt gently pulled it out, turned the man over and looked into the dead face of Buck Thomas.

The Runt swore, and then crossed over to the huddled form of Sixpence.

The native was still alive; blood oozed out of a small hole just below his heart.

"I saw him creep to the cattle *scherm*, Master," he gasped. "And so I threw an assegai at him. He saw me, fired and then turned to run. But my second assegai was faster than he was. Is he dead, Master?"

"Yes, Sixpence."

"*Au-a!* Great punishment will be mine. I killed before word came. Maybe it will be forgiven me, for I killed in defence of the master's beasts."

A deep booming drum-note sounded ominously.

Sixpence shook off the Runt's supporting hold and sat erect. He rose slowly, painfully to his feet and stood swaying feebly.

"The word has come, Master!" he cried hoarsely. "And you are still here. Death to the white man! Kill! Kill!"

He staggered forward, his hand upraised as if to stab. He lurched forward into the Runt's arms.

"I go to join my people," he gasped.

Once he coughed and then was very still.

"An' that's what the damn' gold craze does," the Runt cried, a dry sob in his voice. "Kills the best friend I ever had. Damn the whites! Why can't they let the blacks alone? Why do they have to come into their country an' make 'em do things they don't want to do? Pioneers—hell! An' all that talk about protectin' the Mashonas from the Matabele, an' convertin' the heathens to Christians. Hell! That talk's all right for churches. But the Pioneers only come up here fer one thing—gold! I'm a good mind to fight for the natives."

He lowered the body of Sixpence gently to the ground; then, getting a pick and shovel, he dug a grave at the entrance to the cattle *scherm*, and in that he buried Sixpence.

Some distance from the *scherm* he dug another grave, a shallow one. His task completed, he felt very tired. He wanted to curl up somewhere and sleep. But he remembered his promise to Purvis.

Wearily he staggered toward the stable, intending to saddle up and ride over to the mine, reproaching himself that he had delayed to dig the two graves.

Then he saw the girl riding up the rising. She was spurring her horse, urging it on to better speed with shrill cries and the lash of her sjambok. The Runt saw that the horse carried a double burden; that Simkins was riding behind the girl.

A few minutes later the girl pulled her sweating mount to a halt at the door of one of his huts.

She jumped excitedly to the ground.

"Come and help me get father down and into the hut!" she cried to the Runt. "Quick!"

Simkins had slumped forward and the Runt saw that he was wounded; his left arm hung helplessly by his side; blood streamed from a wound in his thigh. He grinned cheerfully at the Runt, then fainted. Silently the Runt helped the girl carry her father into the hut, got water and clean rags and watched her bathe and bind up the wounds.

"The rebellion's broke," she cried hysterically.

"Sure, I know it. And I reckon we're goners. How did this happen?"

He nodded toward the mine manager, then went to the door of his hut and looked out. Everything seemed so peaceful. There was nothing to suggest that death lurked beyond the clearing. The girl's horse had disappeared, he noticed.

"They set fire to our huts early this morning," she said tonelessly. "I wanted father to leave then, but he wouldn't. He said that he had to stay and protect the mine property. So we stayed and all the time the natives were drinking and dancing around the burning huts, shouting horrible threats." She shuddered. "Then, about two hours ago, a trooper rode up to the office—it's of tin, you know. They were so busy drinking and dancing that they did not see him. He said that the rebellion was only a flash in the pan. He said that all the leading chiefs had been arrested and the only danger was from isolated bands of warriors who were acting independently. A troop of police is on the way—he volunteered to ride ahead to warn us; he was the lightest of them all, he said, and they gave him their fastest horse. If we can hold out until they come——"

"Hold out!" The Runt commented ironically. "Sure we can hold out. A wounded man, and me and a girl against a couple of hundred blacks. That's easy. Where's this policemen you're talkin' about?"

"They got him as we rode over here—poor boy! And they got father's horse, and when he doubled up on mine they nearly captured us both."

"Well, why did you leave the tin shack at the mine? Didn't the bobby or your old man know when yuh was well off?"

"We had to warn you," she replied simply.

"You're fools," the Runt grumbled. He felt terribly mortified. Instead of taking care of the girl, as he had promised Purvis, he was responsible for her leaving a place where they had a chance to hold out until rescue came.

"And, besides," the girl added, as if what she had just said was a confession of weakness, "father thought your natives would remain loyal and that it would be safer here."

"Well, they didn't and it ain't," the little man said laconically.

There was silence for a little while; the Runt's keen eyes continually searched the bush, looking for some movement that would betray a warrior's presence. The girl came to the doorway and watched with him until a low groan from her father called her back to his side.

Yells sounded faintly; they were coming nearer.

"Hear that?" the Runt asked grimly, looking round at the girl.

She nodded. "They're devils when the blood lust is on them. I—I wonder where Tom is now?"

"He'll be all right," the Runt said confidently. "Ol' Tom can take care of himself. How's your old man?"

"The wounds are not much of themselves, but he has fever and he's weak from loss of blood. He'll be all right in a day or two if blood-poisoning doesn't set in and if——"

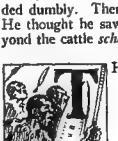
"An' if the blacks don't get us afore the police come," the Runt finished.

"Yes," the girl faltered. "If they don't get us. But we can keep them off for a long time, can't we?" she added bravely. "I'm a good shot, and you——"

"A damn' poor one. Besides, I've only got shotgun ammunition an' about twenty revolver cartridges. Haven't you got anything?"

She shook her head. Then, "You must not fire *all* the revolver cartridges at the natives," she whispered.

The Runt looked into her eyes and nodded dumbly. Then he turned away again. He thought he saw something moving beyond the cattle *scherm*.



THE yells sounded louder, nearer. Words detached themselves from the confused murmur and beat upon the ears of the listeners with terrifying portent. They were words of death—blood—fire—bestial torture.

"What did yuh do with Buck Thomas?" the Runt asked suddenly.

"Buck Thomas?" she repeated wonderingly.

"Yes. Where is he?"

"I don't know the man. Never heard of him. Who is he? Why do you ask?"

The Runt was conscious of a great feeling of relief. He could not doubt the girl's statement. She knew nothing of Buck and, undoubtedly, her father knew nothing of the man, either. Buck Thomas had been acting on his own and he, the Runt, had been altogether wrong in fixing the blame on Simkins. Simkins was only an obstinate old fool, that was all; he would not do any dirty, underhand work.

"Why?" the girl repeated.

"Oh, never mind."

But, when she insisted, the Runt told her of Thomas and the manner of his death.

"He deserved to die," the girl said hotly. "And, Mr. Morton, you must never give up your mining rights. Keep the land as it is; you can, you know. No one can take it from you. You owe that to Sixpence," her voice softened. "He was brave and I think he went out the way he would chose to go. I'm glad you buried him where you did. He will always keep guard over your cattle, won't he?"

She came to the doorway and placed her hand on his shoulder.

The Runt's eyes glowed; she understood.

A small black form broke out of the bush and ran swiftly toward the hut.

"They're coming," the girl gasped. Then, "Why, it's only a little boy."

"It's Kawiti," the Runt cried wonderingly. "I was a-goin' ter make him my gun-bearer. He's a good lad——"

"Master," Kawiti panted as he reached the door of the hut, "you must come with me. My people, the warriors, are coming here and they will kill you."

"And where would you take me?" the Runt asked gravely.

"To the caves where the women are. The warriors will not look for you there. Come, before it is too late."

"It is too late, Kawiti. A white man is in here, he is sick. I must stay with him. Take the white woman and guard her well."

"I will not go!" the girl cried.

Kawiti shook his head.

"Nay. There is no place for her there; the women would kill her. There is no place for anyone but you, Master. The women remember your kindness, they are your friends. Come, before it is too late."

He caught hold of the Runt's sleeve and tried to drag him away.

"Yes, go," the girl urged. "There is no need for us all to die. Leave me your revolver and go."

She turned to her father's side.

The Runt gently released Kawiti's hold of his sleeve.

"I stay here," he announced. "You're a good boy, Kawiti, but——"

The boy's face fell.

"The women sent me," he said shrilly, "because I am faster than all the others and because I am as cunning as a warrior. I ran fast; I crawled on my belly like a snake; I passed so close to the warriors that I could have spat on their backs. And now, if I go back without the master, the women will call me a coward and a liar. I will not be able to boast of the things I have done. *Au-a!*" Then his face brightened. "So," he concluded, "I will not go back to the caves. I will stay here. My eyes are very keen and, maybe, the master will let me be his gun-bearer before the end comes."

"Truly," the Runt said softly and going into his hut he gave the girl his revolver and all the cartridges he had.

"You are going?" she questioned sadly.

"No. But this is safer with you. I might get blotted out, or captured and then——"

Her face brightened. She had thought that he was going to the caves and had grieved because he had not measured up to the standards of a man.

The Runt took a heavy shotgun from the wall and a cartridge belt. Taking them outside he gave the gun to Kawiti and buckled the belt about the boy's shoulders.

Kawiti's eyes glowed with pride and he stood stiffly erect, the gun over his shoulder.

"Look! They are coming!" he called presently. As he spoke a wave of black warriors surged out of the bush and ran, leaping and yelling, brandishing assegais and knobkerries, toward the cattle *scherm*.

The girl came outside, her mouth set hard, her eyes unnaturally bright.

"Don't fire," said the Runt. "It ain't time, yet—besides they're out of range."

"They are all men of my kraal, the dogs!" said Kawiti.

The Runt reached down and picked up the sjambok which the girl had dropped when she dismounted. He drew the rhinocerous hide whip absent-mindedly through his fingers.

THE natives shouted exultantly when they saw the three standing outside the hut; then they stopped and huddled together for consultation.

"You can live a little longer," one of them shouted presently. "First we make a big fire so that we may eat. When we are filled, we will take you, and the old man, and the woman and the boy who forgets his color. Then you will pray for death to come quickly. We will——"

Followed unspeakable, obscene threats.

The Runt looked with dull eyes at the natives, opened his mouth as if to answer

threat with threat. Then he turned to the girl.

"If it hadn't been fer me, that blighter would have been dead a year or more," he muttered. "A momba bit him on the thigh, an' I cut open the wound an' doctored him—oh, hell!"

The three watched as the warriors milled about the cattle *scherm*.

"Don't shoot," the Runt said sharply as the girl raised the revolver. "They ain't done nothin' to deserve death; not yet, they haven't. They don't know no better. Besides, it 'ud only make 'em mad an' they'd finish us all the sooner. Hold yuh horses, missy. If that trooper was a-tellin' the truth, every minute saved, counts. I hope the blacks beat it afore the police come," he added.

A grain store hut burst into flames.

"Damn 'em," the Runt muttered and struck viciously at a lizard with the sjambok.

From the cattle *scherm* came loud bellows of pain. A maddened bull broke through the stockade, assegais sticking into the soft flesh of its belly, bleeding from many small cuts. It lumbered toward the hut; was only sixty feet away when a cunningly thrown assegai severed its tendons and it fell forward on its side, bellowing.

The girl fired and the bull was still.

"Thanks," muttered the Runt, his eyes glowing with anger.

Wild, derisive shouts greeted the killing of the bull.

Clouds of dust rose above the cattle *scherm;* the bellowing grew louder. Another beast broke away and fell, kicking spasmodically out of range of revolver shot.

"Damn 'em!" the Runt screamed and ran toward the *scherm*, slashing at the air with the sjambok. After him, staggering a little under the weight of the shotgun, went his gun-bearer Kawiti.

"The white man comes!" a warrior shouted the warning.

The shout was taken up by several others, and the warriors left their bloody work in the *scherm* and massed about the opening. Some threw assegais at the white man, but they went wide of their mark. A knobkerry caught him a glancing blow on the side of the head. It staggered him slightly, but he came on, swearing, threatening.

The warriors were silent; some in the front rank tried to get behind their fellows. The Runt had slowed down to a walk, his face working horribly, and there was something terribly implacable about him, something which sobered the warriors. It was a thing entirely beyond their knowledge or understanding that a white man, such a puny white man, should come against them armed only with a sjambok. What then? Were they dogs? Did he intend to beat them?

They swayed uneasily. Some yelled threats which trailed off into silence.

The Runt halted not ten paces from them and looked at them sternly, silently.

"You fools!" he shouted suddenly, his voice hoarse with rage. "You pigs! You dogs!"

A low growling murmur answered him.

"Tell me," he continued, "what you do to dogs who forget their master, who kill their master's goats, who snap at his hand?"

He waited for a reply but no one answered.

"Answer!" he shouted fiercely. "Tell me what is done to those dogs?"

"Those dogs are beaten, Master," a man in the rear rank answered fearfully.

The Runt rushed with a berserk madness at them, striking left and right with the sjambok. They gave ground and opened up before the fierceness of his attack. He darted among them, turning and twisting. Again and again assegais and knobkerries menaced him, but the menace always melted at the cutting sting of the lash and the fierce light in his eye.

Truly, they thought, the white man is mad.

They backed away from him; moans took place of battle yells and bloody threats. They were like boys who, after a brief triumph of mutiny against the inanimate things of school life, suddenly find themselves confronted by the teacher, birch in hand; still capable of mischief, but ashamed to work it; still threatening and abusive, but threatening and abusing only because they can find nothing else to say.

The Runt's arm rose and fell with machinelike regularity; the sjambok was stained red.

"You dogs, you dogs!" he cried. Then, "To your kraal, my children. I punish you now to save you from the greater punishment the police will give when they come, as come they will. To your kraal!"

Presently they broke and ran headlong, plunging through the thick bush, indifferent to the tear of thorns, seeking only to get away from the torture of the lash.

A hundred yards or more the Runt fol-

lowed them, then checked himself and stood swaying in his tracks, breathing heavily.

"The poor fools," he said dully. "The poor fools."

Kawiti came to him and touched him gently on the arm.

"Come, Master," he said. "They have gone like dogs to their kraals."

"No; I must stay here to keep guard against their return."

"They will not return, Master. I know my people. Come. The master has a wound." The blood was streaming down the Runt's face from a deep gash over his eye. "Come and let the woman tend to it."

"Listen!" the Runt cried.

"Oh, listen!" the girl echoed happily.

They heard the drumming of many horse's feet; fragments of a ribald song, a favorite of the Pioneers, sounded above the drumming hoofs.

A contented smile passed over the Runt's face and he was conscious of a great peace. Then he moved slowly back to the huts, walking as one who is asleep, and Kawiti paced proudly beside him. The Runt passed the girl who had run out to meet him, deaf to her words of congratulation, apparently not seeing her.

Coming to the hut he used as an office, he threw himself down on the floor and the next moment was fast asleep, snoring loudly, the boy Kawiti standing guard outside the door of the hut.

AND so the Runt knew nothing of the arrival of the Mounted Police force and he was still asleep when Purvis arrived just before sundown.

When the girl and Purvis entered two hours later, they had to bribe Kawiti before he would let them pass in silence to see if the Runt was all right. He did not move.

"Put that *kaross* over him, Tim," the girl whispered, shading the light of the candle so that its rays would not disturb the sleeper. "He'll be cold."

Purvis stooped down and took up the large skin blanket which served as a rug. Then he quickly, but carefully, replaced it.

"I'll take this one instead, Ruth," he said and took down a gaudy trade blanket which hung on the wall.

He tucked it about the Runt gently; then they both tiptoed out of the hut.

"Why didn't you cover him with the *kaross*, Tom?" the girl asked. "It would have been much warmer."

"Because, Ruth, that *kaross* covered a rock outcrop and, knowing the Runt as I do, I'm willing to bet it's the location of the reef your dad's syndicate is so eager to find."

"But they never will find it," the girl vowed solemnly.

Early next morning Ruth went to the Runt's hut, a cup of steaming black coffee in her hand. She found the door shut and padlocked.

"Why, where's Mr. Morton?" she asked a trooper who was standing by.

The trooper grinned.

"He was up before daybreak, Miss Simkins, and saddled his old horse and rode off. Said he was going to ride round his farm. Purvis says he does that every day. Queer sort of chap, the Runt, isn't he? Now, if I was in his shoes, I'd spend my time with a prospector's outfit. They say there's lots of gold about here. But it don't interest the Runt, Purvis says. All the Runt seems to care for is land. Queer; but there's no accounting for tastes, is there?"

"No," she agreed quietly, "there's no accounting for tastes."

ADVERTISING "VIGILANTES OF MONTANA"

THE most notable exploit of the Vigilantes of Montana was the breaking up of Henry Plummer's band of road agents and murderers, one of the worst aggregations of criminals in the annals of the West, eclipsed only by the notorious Jesse James gang. Immediately after the capture, conviction and execution of Plummer and his men, the first poster to advertise a Montana book appeared as follows:

"Now completed and ready for sale, an impartial and correct history of the Vigilantes of Montana Territory, comprising a full account of the chase, capture, trial and execution of Plummer's Great Band of Road Agents! Single copies or by the wholesale can be secured of D. W. Tilton & Company, at the City Book Store, Virginia City, and at their office on Bridge St., Helena, Montana. A liberal reduction made on large orders. Send in your orders now, as a limited edition has been printed. Price per copy, in dust: $2.00; Greenbacks: $2.25."—J. R. J.

THE EYES OF TECONCE

By ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON

To a remote point of interior South America, Montague had fled to escape the pursuing eyes of the Law, the accusing eyes of Civilization—only to find that on the frontier eyes are sharper even than in cities

THE condor, the largest bird that flies, and the ostrich, the largest that runs, were at home at the Ojos of Teconce. The condor circled above the *ojos*, black against the white snow of the upper Andean slope, and its scaly eyes scanned gluttonously the Canyon of Teconce for dead meat. The ostrich stood knee-deep in one of the *ojos* and kicked the water over its dust-covered plumage. It then strode ashore and pecked at the blooms of the pampa grass that grew between the springs, and then topped off its repast with a dessert of sand and pebbles. Then the ground bird stood lazily in he sunshine and cocked its eyes upward at the condor, which was less fortunate.

Upon this scene, at the Ojos, or Twin Springs, of Teconce, on the dimmest outpost of the far-flung frontier of a continent, came slowly and painfully up Teconce Canyon a third bird—the largest bird that creeps. Came slowly and painfully because his feet were weary, bruised by the rocks of the foothills, and blistered by the sands of the saltpetre desert—this creeping bird, this jail-bird, Slippery Montague.

It was a day of hottest January. The mid-summer sun seemed near at hand in the altitude of fourteen thousand feet, and there was not a tree in the canyon to defend against it. It was midday, and the shade of the red rock walls was negligible. They simply stored the heat, and Montague glared at them and cursed. He cursed the heat, and he cursed the great wide desert solitude in general, and he cursed the burro that he prodded along the uprise before him.

The trail was only a llama footpath, but the burro, albeit packed to his limit, managed it, while the man stumbled along behind. So they came to the Ojos of Teconce, the two great springs that feed the canyon, and beyond which, into the eternal snows of the volcanic slopes, no man of Montague's race might safely go. When they arrived, both the condor and the ostrich were gone.

Slippery Montague unpacked. He was quite pleased with this retreat. He had tasted one of the springs, and, though it was tepid, almost hot, he had found it sweet and saltless. He had feared the water might be salty, like that which he had followed from the saltpetre desert, but here, at the end of the long trail, it was good. And he was safe.

For if not safe here, where else safe? Where further from Broadway, New York, where he was least safe, could he be? From his pack he took the sack, weighing some ten pounds with its loot, and smiled as he realized how safely he

and it were hidden now. Safe from all eyes: from the eyes of Clement Jewels, Inc.; from the eyes of McCausland, who had trailed him far but not far enough. He smiled and tossed the sack upon the ground. There it lay, a conspicuous thing, brown velvet with a gilt monogram upon it, yet hidden as he was himself, in the heart of the wilderness of the western slope of the Andes. No need to hide it more.

It was a pleasant refuge, by comparison. Here were two great round springs, feeding and originating a stream. Though the water came almost hot from the bowels of the volcano, Montague knew that if set aside in a pail, it would cool at night—almost freeze. And here, for the first time since leaving the Pacific coast, the man found a little vegetation; sage, cactus, pampa grass. Here would be ducks and viscachi for meat; perhaps also a vicuña, the Chilean deer. Here, where the eternal desert was kissed by the eternal snows, the one below, the other above, would be a climate combining the warmth of the tropics and the coolness of altitude—and here, above all, would be safety and the absence of prying eyes.

It was a pleasant retreat, this canyon of the Ojos of Teconce.

Teconce? That, Montague knew, was the name of the nearest volcano in the sawtooth range above him. But *Ojos!* what did that mean? Idly curious in his leisure, Montague squatted upon a rock and looked up the word in his pocket Spanish dictionary.

Here it was—*ojos*. Eyes. The word meant eyes. Slippery Montague regarded the two great round springs and started nervously. When he looked at them now, there was an unpleasant suggestion in them. He stared at the twin, bubbling pools, and they seemed to stare back at him. Eyes? Indeed the foam in their middles, now that he knew the meaning of *ojos*, did seem to resemble pupils in great natural, glassy eyes. The man stared, and frowned, and shrugged, and looked away; and then back again. The great springs seemed ever to stare at him, and at the velvet sack upon the ground beside him.

Montague had the superstition of a criminal, and the word "eyes" annoyed him. He had come far to avoid eyes. Now, it seemed, he had squatted after all before the never-winking retina of eyes. It was a tiny dictionary that the man carried and consulted. Had it been a large one, he would have been informed that *ojos* did mean "eyes," but that the word was also sometimes used to mean "springs."

Eyes the book said they were, and eyes they now seemed to Montague, eternal eyes that watched and accused. They were eyes that wavered not, as did his own bloodshot ones. Somehow the sack upon the ground did not seem so safe as it had at first. With an oath, the man picked it up and walked with it some distance toward the opposite side of the canyon. There he tossed it into a clump of pampa grass. This done, he returned with defiant mien and built his first fire on the brink of the Springs of Teconce.

HAT night, Montague shivered as he slept, or tried to sleep, on the ground beside the *ojos*. No sun of the tropics was there to warm him now, and the cold icy breath of altitude chilled him. For, though actually at but the foot of the main backbone of the Andes, he was as high as the highest peak of his native country. He was cold.

He slept a little, however, and he dreamed, as he had always dreamed of late, that McCausland was close upon him. It was his chronic nightmare, this pursuit that McCausland gave him by night in dream, as he had given him by day in the flesh. Somehow, on this first night at Teconce, and especially toward morning when from sheer exhaustion he slept heavily, the dream seemed more real. McCausland was close. McCausland's hand was on his shoulder.

In a red dawn—red against the red rocks of this wilderness—Montague sat up and rubbed his eyes. It was a persistent nightmare—this one, for it clung to him even as he scrambled to his feet. McCausland! Montague jerked his shoulder, but McCausland's grip tightened. The waking man rubbed his eyes, but the dream persisted and merged into reality. It was McCausland.

Awake at last, Montague stared, unbelieving, at the big man who stood beside him. It was indeed McCausland. The grip on Montague's shoulder might be a phantasy, but the cold muzzle of McCausland's pistol against the fugitive's ribs, as the two stood beside the *ojos* in the red dawn of the Andes, was real.

It was unthinkable; yet there he was, this Bulldog McCausland who never let

go. There he was, and Montague blinked at him, blinked again, cursed, and admitted that it was true.

"Got you, Slippery," greeted McCausland, with a happy grin.

With the sound of human voice, breaking the silence of a week, Montague's nerve returned. After all, McCausland had yet to find the goods on him. Until he did so—well, until he did, Mac could never really prove anything.

"Hell you have, Mac; what for?" the fugitive answered.

Mac was big and hearty, and this remark of Montague's gave him a laugh. Here was innocence personified. The idea of Slippery Montague, alley rat, having come guiltlessly to this far edge of the wilderness was amusing to McCausland.

"That's right, Slippery; what for? What for did you come up here eight thousand miles from nowhere? For the scenery, eh, Slippery?" McCausland roared his amusement till it echoed.

But he sobered. True, his chase of this man in this instance, was founded only on suspicion. It was a dominant suspicion, but still only a suspicion.

Slippery knew this; he shrugged and did not answer. Let McCausland find the goods.

The big man had already possessed himself of Montague's weapons, while the latter slept, and now he pocketed his own. Without further reference to his errand, he began to make a fire and prepare breakfast. His own pair of packed burros stood at hand, and he eased their loads.

He motioned for Slippery to strip bacon and to bring water, and Slippery sullenly obeyed. Slippery realized that his position might be worse. McCausland would search for the sack, but would he find it? Not one chance in a hundred. The canyon was strewn with rocks, volcanic ash, bush, and what not, and there was little chance that McCausland would stumble on the one hiding-place of a possible thousand that now concealed the sack. If he did not, he could never really pin the affair upon Slippery Montague.

Slippery knew that it had been in the pitch darkness of the sorting room, from which he himself had switched the lights, that he had snatched this bag of ornaments from the Clement clerk. No one, he was sure, had seen his face. Only the finding of "the goods" on him could connect him with the affair. Even then, Slippery further bolstered his returning confidence; they could not extradite him for theft. Why else had he come to this far South American retreat?

The two men breakfasted, and then McCausland put his question:

"Where's the stuff, Slippery?"

"What stuff?" parried Montague.

McCausland grinned because he had expected such an answer. McCausland grinned because he could well afford to do so. He was certain that he had this man, had him dead to rights. It was true that he could prove nothing without finding the loot, but he was sure that with patience this could be done. The loot must be heavy, unless Slippery had taken occasion to gouge the jewels from the conglomerate collection of platinum and gold ornaments in which they were set. About ten pounds, sack and all, the Clements had told him.

But McCausland grinned mainly because he read the other's thoughts and knew that Slippery was counting heavily on the fact that theft was an unextraditable crime under the American-Chileno treaty. He suppressed his grin. Let the man hold tightly to this false ace of security. He, McCausland, had the real ace up his sleeve, as regarded this extradition kink. He would play it at the proper time, and not before.

Of one thing McCausland was certain. The other man had the stuff nearby, and he would not leave without it. He could not leave down-canyon, the only avenue of escape, without McCausland's knowledge.

AFTER breakfast, McCausland began his search. He realized that it was a very small needle and a very large haystack that confronted him, but there was nothing to be lost by a try. He put in the morning at it, as Montague looked on contemptuously. In ever widening circles about the springs, he looked under rocks and examined crevices.

Montague's sour contempt changed to a sweat-beaded dread once or twice, as McCausland came near to the clump of pampa grass that held the sack. The slippery one had some bad moments at these times, but, on each occasion, the search became cold again.

The boulder-strewn floor of the canyon was too much for the search of one man, and McCausland gave it up at noon.

Montague, on his part, had begun to worry about this extradition matter, from which he had all along found such satisfying security. Surely McCausland was not such a fool as not to know about that? Perhaps the big one had some way of beating it. Montague began to worry about the thing. As McCausland terminated his search, Slippery put out a feeler.

"McCausland, suppose I did have this stuff. Just supposing. How would you go about extraditing me?"

McCausland hid the elation the question produced in him. Now he knew that Slippery had the stuff.

"Slippery, I guess you're right," he evaded. "Anyway, it looks like you never got the stuff. I might as well be going. So long."

With this sudden adieu, McCausland rounded up his two burros, packed them without apparently seeing the disbelieving sneer of Montague, and disappeared with them down the canyon.

It was Slippery's turn to laugh. He did so now, for the trick was too obvious. McCausland was simply going to give him a chance to find the sack, and then be upon him again. Not much, thought Montague. That sack was well hidden, and it could stay exactly where it was.

Doubtless McCausland was peering at him right now from down below, from behind the turn in the canyon. The thought of unseen eyes spying upon him caused Montague to shudder a little; it set his nerves bouncing again. Very well, he would test out his theory; he would bait McCausland.

Montague walked in the opposite direction from where he had the sack cached, and stooped behind a boulder some distance away. He assumed a stealthiness, which was not difficult, for it was his natural manner. He messed with a pile of small rocks; moved them; appeared to be digging something from under them. Over the boulder he peered cautiously down the canyon. Were the eyes of McCausland upon him? Doubtless they were; soon the big man would come running, and make a fool of himself.

Montague hid a grin; he kept digging, and kept peering down the canyon. But McCausland did not come. Why did he not? Had he, after all, really given up and left? Unthinkable. Yet he did not come. Montague's trick, his bait for the man's return, developed a reflex kick. He had been fairly certain that eyes were upon him at first. That had been bad enough for nerves; but now to be uncertain about it!

Montague cursed. Eyes that looked at you were bad enough; but eyes that might be looking, or might not—eyes that you could not stare back into, and laugh with bravado—these were the very devil's tools. Montague flinched. He himself was the baited fool.

His eyes now turned furtively toward the far side of the canyon, toward the real hiding-place of the loot. There he saw a strange sight, and he paused, forgot McCausland for the moment, and gaped.

A large ostrich walked down a crevice from the plateau above, entered the canyon, and approached the Springs of Teconce. It stopped at the first pool and quenched its noonday thirst, as was its daily wont.

Montague gaped. He had seen these birds in zoos, and he supposed they were found in the wild state only in Africa; did not know that they are common enough on the plateaus of Bolivia and Chile. He gaped at the bird, watched it drink, kick water over its plumage, and then stride ashore for its noon-day meal of pampa grass and pebbles.

He watched the bird peck at what food it found to his taste, as it turned deliberately along the path it had come. A bloom of grass here, a stalk there, a needle of sage, with a pebble at times sliding down the curved avenue of his throat. Montague was transfixed by this sight, but he gasped when the ostrich stoop beside the most luxuriant pampa clump of all his pasture and began to feed upon it. The man gasped and arose to his feet as the long neck of the bird buried itself in this clump.

Damn the bird! Damn the bird's eyes, which now surely must spy a gilt monogram on a velvet sack. The bird's neck straightened; the head arose with a jerk, and the velvet sack catapulted from the clump, thrown by the pluck of curiosity that the gilt monogram had inspired. Montague no longer gaped or gasped; he screamed.

The ostrich turned, saw, heard, and sped up the crevice for the haven of his desert.

At that moment Montague could have bitten off his tongue. He had given the show away. There, across the canyon, unhidden, exposed to the sunlight, was his precious sack of loot; and he had deliberately baited McCausland to come back. He cursed himself, and then the ostrich

Down the canyon he saw McCausland coming on the run.

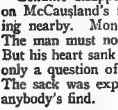
Had the eyes of McCausland been upon him after all? Had they seen the ostrich? Even if not, here was a pretty kettle of fish. With any search at all, McCausland could scarcely miss the sack this time. Montague squirmed at the situation, but he turned his back on the springs and assumed an interest in the other direction. McCausland arrived jubiliantly.

"Got her dug up yet, Slippery?" he asked. Immediately he began to paw with confidence among the rocks at Montague's feet.

Montague took heart. Was the big man, after all, the fool of the two of them?

"Dug what up?" he answered smugly.

Genuine disappointment was to be seen on McCausland's face, as he found nothing nearby. Montague took more cheer. The man must not have seen the ostrich. But his heart sank again. After all, it was only a question of time, perhaps minutes. The sack was exposed now, over there—anybody's find.



McCAUSLAND doggedly kept up the search. He began to move in wider circles from the spot. Montague's heart stood still. He could see the sack from where he stood, the gilt monogram flashing in the sun. McCausland could not miss it long. The thing fairly shouted, "Here I am."

McCausland passed within a dozen yards of the sack on his next circle, and Montague's nerves almost forced him to hold his hands forth and say, "Hell, Mac, pick it up." They almost, but they did not, for the big man passed the hot proximity, on this circle and the next, without seeing the object of his search. The man was looking for something hidden, not something exposed. When, on his next circle of his search, he must have fairly stepped on the sack, he gave it up.

Was he blind? Was he deaf—that he did not hear Montague's thumping heart, or his sigh of relief when the hunt was ended?

McCausland quit his search again and tried another tack. He would go back down the canyon and wait. This time he made no pretense of his intention.

"Slippery, you got that hid somewhere," he said frankly. "You won't leave without it, and you won't leave without me seeing you. You can't get out to civilization alive without following this water through the desert. Somewhere along it I'll be waiting for you. I may be back tomorrow to look some more, and again I mayn't. So long."

Montague at first wondered why the big man did not camp beside him at the springs to watch him the better. Soon he reasoned it out. It might be a long vigil; and McCausland was wise to the ways of crookdom. McCausland must sleep at times. He would, of course, risk no sleep with Slippery Montague nearby, to steal away with the loot perhaps, or perhaps to choke the big man, or brain him with a rock. On the other hand, McCausland, by camping below in the canyon, could watch the only avenue of escape and yet snatch a little rest at times.

During the afternoon, Montague, though he dared not move forward to retrieve the sack from its exposed position on the ground, either while McCausland was searching or after he had gone, had scanned the topography of the canyon to select another hiding-place for the loot. Under the cover of darkness, he must secrete it again. He chose the spot that he meant to use, and the long, interminable afternoon irked him fiendishly. It seemed that it would never end.

It was cruel punishment to his nerves. There he must sit and watch that gaudy thing on the ground, hour after hour, when but a few minutes would be required to place it in a perfect hiding-place. It racked him, and his nerves were jumping badly when night came at last.

Night did come, and in the darkness, before the moon had risen above the snow-capped volcanoes to the eastward, Montague moved. He retrieved the sack with trembling hand. He groped his way over the boulders to the extreme wall of the canyon, and he began to ascend that crevice through which the ostrich had escaped to the desert plateau above.

Ascending this crevice carefully, he reached a point midway up the height of the canyon wall. There he began to grope his way outward on a narrow ledge along the face of the wall. After crawling along this ledge for a short distance, he saw, against the dim starlight above him, the spot he had chosen for the second hiding-place of the sack. It was another ledge, some ten feet above him, where a sage-bush seemed to grow from the rock itself.

Montague arose to his feet, took careful

aim, and tossed the velvet sack upward in an arc. It fell behind the bush on the ledge above him. It was a perfect toss, and Montague grinned his satisfaction in the darkness. He descended to his camp beside the *ojos*, and he slept.

For the first night in many he slept a dreamless sleep, for his mind was at rest. For his first night in many he had no fear. The thing he had carried so far was not on him, or near him, or where eyes might find it. Let McCausland come in the morning. Montague slept.

In fact, when in the morning McCausland did stand beside him, Montague was really glad. McCausland beside him in the flesh was infinitely preferable to McCausland peeking from the canyon below. The solitude was irksome to the fugitive, and the presence of his pursuer was helpful to the tension of his nerves. No danger of McCausland finding the loot today.

McCausland had bagged a viscachi somewhere down the canyon, and he dressed this long-eared rock squirrel of the Andes while Montague made the fire. Montague was in fair temper.

McCausland, having dressed his game, which, but for its long tail, might have been a jack-rabbit, tossed the skin and the waste parts some distance away. The meat was fried and the two men fell-to like friends. McCausland was a hearty man, and Montague, with his nerves at ease and fear gone from him, was almost a human companion.

But now, at the very outset of this holiday for his nerves, as the two men squatted and forked the first meat of the meal, the whole castle of his security came tumbling down upon Slippery Montague's head. McCausland, with a casual remark, spoiled it all.

"Slippery," said McCausland, "I looked over the ground in this canyon pretty well yesterday, but I never looked up on the walls any. Today, I'm going to look around the walls. Think I'll find anything?"

Snap went Montague's nerves again, and again there began within him that mental anguish, garnished by the unspoken curses that he could not even have the satisfaction of uttering. The canyon walls! What spot on them was more prominent than that single brushy bush on the wall opposite?

Montague tossed the unfinished bone savagely from him. All taste for food left him. He strove to keep his eyes from turning to the hiding-place, and it was all he could do to manage it, so strong was the impulse to speculate anew upon the chances of its discovery.

He pulled his eyes away, and he looked at the twin springs of Teconce. More than ever they now seemed to him great, wise, all-seeing eyes. Did he but imagine that their respective foams, their pupils, were turned to the right and were staring accusingly at the spot on the opposite canyon wall? Right in the midst of this uncanny speculation, with Montague's nerves on edge with its suggestion, one of the eyes of Teconce, so steady heretofore—winked. Montague started, stared; and the other eye of Teconce—winked.

MONTAGUE batted his hand to his face, then peered guiltily at McCausland, and saw that the latter was looking up. Montague, too, looked up. Above them the two men saw the black thing whose moving shadow had caused the *ojos* to wink. It circled low, and lower.

The condor, which spends its vulturous life waiting for viscachi to die, and which miraculously seems to appear in a moment wherever dead things are, had its eyes on the skin and head and entrails of the animal just thrown aside. Montague cursed. He cursed, for there were eyes on the ground and eyes in the sky.

"Damn eyes," thought Montague.

The bird, with the widest wings that spread, circled. It saw the two men, alien to its domain and hence enemies; alive, for the time being at least, and hence not food. It screamed a scream of hate and circled off, then back again; but it dared not pounce upon the meat. It screamed again and circled, and then alighted upon a favorite spot, to watch and wait.

Now Montague's morale cracked, and he made scarcely an effort to suppress a groan. He made scarcely an effort to suppress the curse he hurled at the black, filthy condor on the wall. Then with his hands he hid from McCausland the telltale self-consciousness of his face. Through them he damned again the black monster of the air that perched upon the wall.

The condor, seated upon the brush-pile of its last year's nest, stretched its wings and answered curse with curse, as it screamed its hate at the men. It stormed over its brush-pile, and rocked it with its weight. Loose rocks rattled down the can-

yon wall. Montague shivered but dared not look to see what manner of rocks these were. He heard them, but dared not look.

Fool! Why had he not seen that that was no sagebush growing on the cliff? Or, if a sagebush, then no growing one, but a dead one, spotted by the claw of a bird. He heard more rocks rattle down the cliff, and stole a glance—and covered his face and groaned.

"What's eating you?" inquired McCausland. He was eating a round breakfast and was in no wise disturbed by the condor.

Montague was too sullen to answer; the game was up. Even his quick glance had revealed the brown sack, with its gilt monogram of Clement Jewels, Inc., lying exposed on the far floor of the canyon. The game was up, for a blind man would find it now.

Slippery Montague decided he would get the infernal condor away anyhow. True, it was too late now; the damage was done. But the hideous bird haunted him, harrowed his nerves, sitting up there with its eyes of hate and screaming continually; perched up there like a filthy raven above the chamber door of his guilt. Damn the condor and its eyes! Montague would be rid of it.

"That skin stinks," he said; and with this excuse he walked to the viscachi skin, scooped the head and entrails into it, and carried them for a distance down the canyon.

He returned. Even as he did, the condor sensed its new clearance of safety, swooped upon its bait, and bore it off awing to the crags of other canyons.

Breakfast over, McCausland wiped his lips and guessed he would be about his business of searching the canyon walls. As he had forecasted, he went about a set program that he had decided upon in the night. He had searched the canyon floor the day before, and today he would search its walls.

So he did, with no mean vigor. Agile for a big man, he spent the day clambering around the sides of the canyon, creeping along benches, stepping gingerly from foothold to foothold of the precipices. His search of the walls was thorough. The floor of the canyon he ignored. In plain sight lay the object of his search, in plain sight to every eye but his. Eyes of the sky and of the ground, all the eyes of Teconce, saw it, but never McCausland's.

From the hour, late in the day, when the big man attained the very ledge of the abandoned condor's nest and sifted the twigs of it through his hands, Montague no longer cursed the condor.

Again night came, and again McCausland went below in the canyon to camp and rest.

Montague breathed freely. With this dark night he would place the sack where never eye of man or bird or beast or mountain might see it in a morning's light.

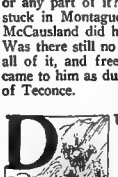
Where? Montague had yet to decide, but it would be in some safe place. First he would empty the sack and burn it. Then he must gouge the jewels from the ornaments and throw the latter to the four winds. Thus he would be rid of the conspicuous sack and the weight of the gold and platinum. The jewels would weigh ounces instead of pounds; would be easier to hide.

Yes, he must sacrifice about nine pounds of precious metal, although the thought of the sacrifice wrenched him. It galled him to do it, for he had carried this weighty loot many thousands of miles. But better to salvage freedom, than lose both freedom and the loot. Better to salvage freedom with which to loot again. Freedom?

"Rats," exclaimed Montague, "my nerves have made a fool of me. Why'm I sweating for nothing? That big stiff McCausland can't pinch me. I'm in Chile. To hell with him. I'll keep what I got."

With all his spoken bravado, Slippery worried. He knew McCausland. He knew the big fellow was no man to sit in a game like this unless he had a hand with which he could call. So he worried. He would like to keep the stuff, every ounce of it; but could he?

Should he give up this prince's ransom, or any part of it? The idea of so doing stuck in Montague's craw. Suppose that McCausland did have an ace in the hole? Was there still no way to salvage the loot, all of it, and freedom too? The answer came to him as dusk settled over the Ojos of Teconce.



DUSK came, and there came to that lone spot, trailing down from the snow-bound summit of Teconce, a strange caravan of animals and men. It was a caravan which, alone of all manner of transportation, might bring the needs of man to and from that far and lofty corner of the Western Hemisphere. In that silent dusk, there drove down

upon the Ojos of Teconce, and upon Slippery Montague brooding by them, a pack-train of two hundred llamas, herded by an old Indian and his boy. Each animal was laden with a hundred pounds of silver ore. It is a train that comes to that lone spot once in every year, always in mid-January, when the snows above the *ojos* are the least. It comes from an ancient of ancient mines, where the Incas mined, and now their descendants; where no Spaniard or his kind has ever molested; where the few survivors of an ancient race still hold the last frontier of a kingdom.

Came these two Indians, the man and the boy, with their year's accumulation of hand-picked silver ore, a hundred pounds each on two hundred llamas. They were bound for Calama, on the saltpetre desert below.

Out of the crags above the *ojos,* they came like shadows, and they were about and around Montague like a vision of wraiths. They terrified him at first—these spotted specters of the night—and he shivered.

But as he marked the timidity of the Indians, and heard the sheeplike bleats of the animals as they pushed to water and later bedded down, he ceased to be afraid. He watched the Indians, as they moved among their charges, and he marveled at the wonderful domesticity of these beasts of burden. He saw that each pack consisted of two bags, thrown across the back of the bearer, with not even a cinch to secure it underneath. He noted that there was no rope or halter upon the heads.

The sight of the llamas, once the shock of their arrival had passed, fascinated him. He recalled them now, as they had come into camp, spotted, red, white, and multicolored, jumping from rock to rock at times, and with never an unbalancing of uncinched pack.

Montague watched the train water, saw the two Indians move about and tip each pack to the ground, and saw each animal lie down upon the ground beside its pack. It would have taken a host of wranglers to have handled as many mules, and volleys of energy, at least, if not curses. But not so here. Here were no words, no ropes, no wasted energy. It was discipline unknown to the race of Montague, or to their beasts.

Montague watched these things, through his camp-fire, and he even stroked the hairy wool of a pinto llama that lay the nearest to him. As he stroked this gentle, trusting beast—this half-sheep, half-camel—and watched the supreme tranquility of its fellows chewing their cuds on the canyon floor, the answer to his problem came to Slippery Montague.

Day came, and with it again came McCausland. As the big man appeared at the *ojos,* the Indians, up betimes, were ready to leave with their pack-train of ore.

McCausland found Montague in fair temper, and with his breakfast chores nearly done.

"Hi, Slippery, where'd you get the zoo?" he shouted.

"Funny outfit, eh?" answered Montague, agreeably enough.

McCausland was stiff from his climbing of the previous day, and today he was in a mood to reason rather than to work.

"Slippery, where do we go from here?" he came to the point.

"What you mean, Mac?" Slippery evaded as usual.

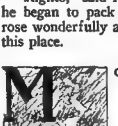
"Well," said McCausland, "it's this way. You've cached the stuff. I can't find it. I can starve you out of this place, if I want to; I've got two burro loads, and you got one. See? What you going to do about it? You can't leave with that bag without my knowing it, and you can't stay here as long as I can."

Montague saw this point; in fact, he had been hoping that McCausland would bring it up. It saved him from bringing it up himself. It furnished him an excuse for doing the very thing he wanted to do.

"All right, Mac; I get you. If I've got the stuff, which I ain't, I'm going to leave it, here. I'm going home. Want to go with me?"

"You're right I want to go with you," answered McCausland. "And I'm going to stay with you when you get there, understand? Some day you'll come back for this stuff, and I'll be right behind you. Don't forget it."

"Righto," said Montague, and forthwith he began to pack his burro. His spirits rose wonderfully at the thought of leaving this place.



McCAUSLAND left for his camp to pack his own stock, and an hour later the two white men, driving their three animals, were hard on the back trail down Teconce Canyon. Ahead of them strung out the llama train, bound for Calama, the nearest outpost of civilization.

It was impossible to pass through the llama train in the narrow canyon, where, except at the rarest spaces, they must all go single-file, and so the modern train kept behind the ancient one. There was no hurry, and the pace was fair for all.

Slippery Montague was all grin. Affairs were much to his liking. McCausland had played into his hand. He did want to watch this llama train, to see where it was going, but he would not have dared to follow it so quickly but for McCausland's opening the way.

The brown velvet sack of loot? As good as safe. And where no eyes but Montague's would ever find it.

McCausland was keenly interested in the phenomenon of the pack-train before them, and he became talkative as they trudged along behind.

"They tell me, Slippery, that these llamas are the great little packers. They'll carry exactly one hundred pounds two days without water, but, if you load a pound more than that on them, they quit on you."

Montague was brought up sharply by that remark.

"The hell you say!" he blurted out.

McCausland's speech had set Montague's fickle nerves bouncing again. One hundred pounds. Montague looked ahead. The markedly pinto llama was nearly the last animal in the line. Was it limping? Montague worried. The pinto was limping; it had stopped; its successors passed it on the trail, and the pinto was the last of the line.

The pinto llama limped on; but it looked back over its shoulder at the left side of its pack, and then it looked at the two white men and bleated. The two Indians were not driving the herd, but walked somewhere near the middle, half the beasts preceding, half following them.

The pinto llama again looked backward at the pack, at the white men, and its sheep-like eyes were supplicating. Montague cursed them, for, of all the eyes of Teconce, here were the most accusing of all. The thing almost set Montague crazy. McCausland did not seem to notice. He talked on.

"Yep," and here the big man actually put out his hand and stroked the back of the lagging pinto beast. "Yep, and they tell me you have to load 'em exactly balanced, fifty-fifty; fifty pounds on a side."

McCausland continued to stroke the pinto, which now lagged almost at his side, the gap increasing between it and the next animal of the train. The big man's hand patted the left side of the pinto's pack; patted it, and his palm stroked over the lump of it. Now the animal stood still in its tracks and looked into McCausland's eyes; it looked back at its pack and bleated, and then bruskly set down in the trail.

The old Indian looked back and saw the gap.

Slowly he came back between his charges to discover the cause.

The pinto saw him coming and bleated again; here was help at hand. Its eyes sought those of its master and looked from him again to the left side of its pack. As the old man withdrew the lump that made the load lopsided, and held it in his hand, the sun glinted upon the gilt monogram and even the eyes of McCausland, at last, saw.

"You can't touch me; I'm safe down here!" Montague screamed, as this damning thing glittered before them.

"Not for theft—no," McCausland answered. "I am not after a thief or a thief's loot. What I want is a weapon and the man that used it. Slippery, when you snatched this bag in the dark, the clerk resisted and you brought it down upon his head. The papers waiting for you at the port read 'murderous assault,' and the Commissioner of Extradition has suggested that I produce the weapon of assault. I've got it, Slippery, and you too."

The eyes of Teconce, reinforced now by the eyes of civilization, were trained on Montague. He felt his impotence to escape them. Where are there not eyes? Where? Slippery Montague gave it up as, wrist-bound, he bowed to a world that sees.

SNOW-GOGGLES

THE long Arctic winter is followed by the trying season of the low sun, which, glancing over snow and water, nearly blinds the Eskimo and other northern hunters and fishermen. To meet this emergency, and to prevent snow-blindness, these primitive people from time immemorial have worn snow-goggles, made usually of wood, bone, or ivory, which cover the eyes completely except for a very narrow slit. These effectually eliminate the glare, without too much interference with vision.—F. W. H.

BAIT FOR THE WILY

By AL PRIDDY

When Nat Hathaway begins to set up American spinning machinery in the Room of Enchantments, a new day dawns for backward Mongolia—a day which Sui Lai and his Chinese henchmen decide must be short-lived

YEE, the Mongolian factotum, exploded a package of tiny firecrackers before each crate to numb the foreign machinery devils into temporary harmlessness. Then he allowed a squad of coolies to complete the demolition well begun by a twelve thousand mile journey from Providence, Rhode Island, U. S. A. Scarred, hacked and battered, the huge boxes showed bullet marks as well.

Nat Hathaway noted them and grinned. Just another superstitious symptom like the firecrackers, of course—the Prince for some reason had not seen fit to mention to Nat that half the Mongol convoy had been slain by Chinese raiders while crossing the desert.

A sparkle of good-humor rarely left the corners of Nat's blue eyes nowadays. There was reason to smile and be happy. Prince Abikar Khan was a good fellow, thoroughly likable in spite of his excessively deliberate business methods. Yee, with his elaborate rituals which preceded tasks even as brief as pressing or hanging Nat's coat of wild silk, was better fun than a slapstick movie. The thirty bowing, squealing, muttering, squatting lamas who firmly believed that death as martyrs awaited if ever they laid hands upon one of the great looms, spinning frames or carders now to be assembled in the Prince's "Room of Enchantments," had to be regarded with a grave and sympathetic countenance, of course. Nat's sun-bronzed cheeks fairly ached at times from chuckles repressed.

Tall, slender and cool-looking in his silken whites, Nat looked more the part of a tennis champion than that of a machine specialist. Yet those brown, muscled forearms knew the knack of heavy work. The mind behind that smiling, youthful countenance was trained to meet knotty problems. And though the task of assembling and putting into successful operation Mongolia's first modern woolen mill looked simple enough to him in that moment of pride and determination, perils still unsuspected —in spite of the bullet holes in the crates —threatened. They would demand the application of Nat's last atom of strength and resource.

Six of the crates had been hacked open. The instant each splinter or board was broken from the seventh, a coolie pounced upon it. Wood was precious. His gracious majesty, Abikar Khan, had promised them the broken boxes in exchange for their labor.

Nat, returning with three of the coolies

who failed to understand that their task had not been completed the moment each received and bore away his stick of wood, caught a glint of bright metal lancing through the air. Quicker than thought he dodged, though none too soon. One of his own spindles fanned his cheek with the air of its passing, then *thunked* into the ancient gargoyles of the wall behind, to hang quivering! It had been a narrow escape from terrible death; and instantly the smile vanished from his lips. His keen glance swept the huddle of lamas who chanted Mongol legends as they wiped the sawdust and grease from parts of the machinery, handling it reverently now their greatest fears had been dispelled.

"Not from them," Nat concluded. The nasal din had drowned out for them the *thunk* of the spindle and the commotion of Nat's quick drop to the floor. Besides, their eyes and very souls centered upon the ceremony of wiping clean this wonder-working American magic taken from the caskets so strangely marked.

His glance darted toward the various windows from which the lattices had been removed during the process of lifting through the crates from the old monastery courtyard. Nat raced over and looked into the courtyard. Laman priests and the soldiers of Abikar Khan loafed about everywhere. Near the mud gate that led into the bazaar limped an old beggar; he glanced around just once, caught sight of Nat, and dove down into the bazaar as though the Nine Offspring of the Dragon pursued him.

"No use to chase him there," mused Nat. "Tried to put my light out; that's sure—but what in thunder does it mean? I never saw the ruffian in my life."

Taking the precaution of having the lattices replaced, he turned to work. The thirty lamas were waiting impatiently while the coolies battered at a new crate preparatory to unloading the machine parts. Nat knew enough of their dialect for them to catch his order to wait. He walked over to the blue tool chest and picked out his pump-handle nail-puller, a novelty which had excited the awe and admiration of his thirty lamas on previous days when all hands had toiled in the business of transforming the old Room of Enchantments.

One of the coolie helpers sprang forward, his wrinkled, sober face expanded in an appeal. From the Chinese words sprinkled into his Mongolese, in his effort to make himself understood, Nat knew that the fellow wanted a chance to try his own luck with the nail-puller. He handed it over and indicated a crate to one side which held the parts of an automatic loom.

The coolie beamed. He gabbled shrill derision at his less fortunate comrades, and rushed over, like a child with a toy. Carefully fitting the mouth of the puller over a nail, he gripped the pump handle, lifted it up and brought it down *crash!* on the iron chisel inside. Without a shred of warning there followed a stunning detonation and a flash of white fire! Nat was blown over backward by the explosion. He scrambled to his feet and rushed forward. A piece of the exploding nail-puller had killed the helper, mangling him hideously. The lamas, screaming for Yee and more firecrackers to combat the devils on their own ground, fled the room.

Nat found a soldier and commanded him to stand guard. In a flash the American was over at the ornate entrance to the Mongolian guest tent in which Prince Abikar Khan lived as the guest of the lamas while they all watched the fitting up of the Room of Enchantments.

NAT collided abruptly with the prince at the curtained alcove just inside the door. The prince, a gifted linguist, apologized in English, and asked the cause of the loud noise.

"Just what I rushed over to talk to you about, Prince," exclaimed Nat. "That's the second attempt at murder made within the last half hour. A coolie was killed by mistake this time—the bomb was meant for me!"

The prince gripped Nat's arm nervously, and looked around in the scented alcove apprehensively. Nat allowed himself to be pulled into the main chamber of the guest tent where the prince stood before him, wordless and biting his long fingernails.

Nat waited patiently. He saw that his Mongol friend hardly knew where or how to begin some momentous explanation he had to make.

"I owe you countless apologies, my good American friend," he said lugubriously at last. "In bringing you into Mongolia with the machinery I have involved you in a plot that means certain death! Wool never will be carded or spun in the Room of Enchantments. The machinery shall stand there until it falls to dust, and men shall look upon the melancholy ruin as a re-

minder of that unhappy sovereign, Abikar Khan, whose folly brought death to a friend he loved."

Nat listened to this in blank amazement. Words failed him.

"Yes, death for you, and from our powerful and dangerous Chinese enemies," the prince went on quickly, grimacing the sincerity of his anguish. "You recall the sad history of Mongolia; she has declined from the mighty nation of Genghiz Khan, mistress of India and China, into a weak tribal nomad—what you call a gypsy—people who wander the plains in tents and have no abiding cities save this, their capital. This is the fate our enemies in China wish for us, since in time, when we become too weak for self-government, they will have the excuse to become our masters. A few years ago they ruled over us, but we rose and drove them from our land. They have not given us up, however. They wait and hope that we shall grow too weak to resist; then they will come with their strangler's cords and their gold foil for the throat."

"Oh, I get it now," broke in Nat, excitedly. "And this stunt of yours, Prince, to try and persuade the lamas, the leaders of your people, to learn the use of American machinery is what the Chinese don't like. It would make Mongolia too strong commercially and too well united for them to grab, eh?"

"That is it," admitted the prince. "And these attacks upon you are the first desperate efforts China will make to insure that the experiment fails. Now I understand to the full why China insists on sending the special envoy to be my guest!"

"Envoy?"

"Yes. He arrived last night and is resting in the new guest tent near the west wall. He is China's spy charged with your death and the failure of this first mill. If he can kill you, scare the lamas sufficiently, and destroy the machinery, it will mean the end of all."

"But if you know that this fellow's on a spying mission, Prince, why don't you kick him out, bag and baggage? You've got treaty rights which even an ambassador must respect."

The eyes of the prince brightened in their slanting slits, and his lips muttered as if in a Mongol prayer.

"Ah!" he sighed; then remarked gloomily, "This Sui Lai is far, far too shrewd for me to claim treaty rights to expel him. He will work as Chinese masters of intrigue always have worked, in such a manner as never to seem a part of the cumulating disasters. Everything will be done through agents, and the staff personnel changed frequently. This is the Orient, my friend, and the way of our politics. But if once Sui Lai was known to be involved, and we had proof——"

He concluded with a significant gesture of his clenched hand, the turning of a two-edged sword sunk to its tassels in the breast of an enemy.

"I shall have my own agents try to trace out these attacks," he continued, dropping his shoulders. "But we have had to fight other plots, my friend. Assassins perish, yet who may count the knives of the Yangtse? One string of copper cash will hire a hundred blades during the famine season when river rats are scarce!"

"See here, Prince," exclaimed Nat, impulsively, "you do your share, but let me take a hand. It's all in the day's work. We aren't going to be beaten out of putting up the machinery!"

"But what could you do that we of the East cannot, my dear friend?"

"Well," argued Nat, "your own folks will have to handle Sui Lai with gloves, so as not to involve you in too much trouble. I'm an American, and can go ahead on my own. If he and I gang on each other in earnest, all you've got to do is sit tight and look amazed. 'Ruthless methods of Yankee business'—you know the line."

"Yes, but it would have to be more definite than that," objected the prince with a dubious headshake. "Without a definite plan you are as good as dead already, my friend."

"All right then. Here's my idea. I'm to deal with Sui Lai. You said that if you could get proof of his activity in the plot you could deport him. My job is to make Sui Lai take a hand himself."

"But—how?"

Nat grinned cheerfully. "The wily one has missed two chances to kill me—maybe more than two I didn't even suspect. I'll see that he misses any others he tries, too. Then he'll get sold seriously on a nice, juicy murder planked with all the trimmings, and pick up his own chopsticks. I'll make it worth his while, Prince. I'll certainly make it worth his while. Maybe he won't relish the new dish, though. I'm inventing it. Maybe call it Chop Sui Lai!"

"Again I must ask you how, my friend?" The prince ignored Nat's infantile pun.

"The general idea will be for me to make myself into a good, tantalizing lump of bait that will bring Sui Lai out. That's

the way they catch foxes—with bait for the wily."

NAT'S first move in his desperate attempt to trap the Chinese spy was to close and bar the Room of Enchantments, set a guard of the prince's soldiers on the four sides of the building, and let the rumored impression circulate through the compound and into the bazaar outside the mud gate that the lamas had been scared off by raging genii too long confined in the magic crates.

The coolies, certainly were a frightened lot. Given time to gossip, they went into the bazaar; and by late breakfast every Mongol got his earful of a story of disaster brought in by the foreign devils' iron gods.

Later in the day the dull glow of smouldering and bigoted resentment was fanned, when a creaky and gaudy funeral cart, accompanied by a horde of coolies wailing dismal chants, carried the body of the unfortunate killed by the explosion off across the plain to the foot of an *obi* hill where, according to custom, the corpse was left exposed to the consuming winds and sun.

Nat met the Chinese envoy at the prince's guest tent late in the afternoon. It would have been difficult to tell which of the two, Nat or Sui Lai, masked the most complete satisfaction over the condition of affairs. The American found Sui Lai a wrinkle-faced North Chinaman, with a pursed mouth, pinched blob of nose and slits of eyes bunched together, smiling like an aged yellow Satan. Looking at him, Nat thought of an old, brown, greasy crumpled paper bag dressed up in flames of perfumed silk. Sui Lai could not speak English, or at least professed not to understand the language. Nat didn't believe him.

In what he termed privately a "regular sob sister song-and-dance," Nat mourned all over the place. Even without the aid of glycerin, tears rolled down his cheeks as he pretended the uttermost depths of sorrow over the hold-up of his work. Sui Lai, sipping tea, asked him suavely and sympathetically what was wrong. He had heard of an accident that had frightened the lamas, he volunteered. Surely that would not mean any serious hindrance?

"Looks to me as though the lamas aren't as friendly in helping us get a foothold in Mongolia with machinery as I thought," replied Nat, gloomily. He fairly exuded dank, sticky depression. "You know it was the same when the first mills were started in England; mobs, riots and murders started and committed by the superstitious. It was to be expected out here, of course. But it's tough—especially for me; it's my first really man-sized job."

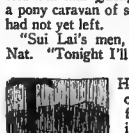
"Are you planning to cease your work for me then?" demanded the prince, following the lead.

"No. I'm going to stick right on here and try to pull through." He watched the effect of this challenge on Sui Lai. The words struck momentary fire from the narrow slits of the Chinaman's eyes. Then the glint died out and the eyes of Sui Lai grew diplomatically dull and sleepy again.

Later in the day Nat was walking about the bazaar; the place was astir with cosmopolitan nomads from the plains who had come to buy, trade, enjoy religious feasts, loaf and gamble. Nat was certain there was something grimly familiar in one glimpse he had caught of a Chinese face. The man certainly was a bow-legged Chinese rider of some sort and he walked with his chest out in military fashion. But put a ragged cloak on him and Nat was certain the man would be the beggar whom he suspected of having thrown the spindle.

Nat kept the man in sight and saw him disappear within the pretentious shop of the Chinese merchant Quong So, who kept the silk booth and sold Indian and Chinese cloths for the polyglot feasts, ceremonials and official displays. Loafing over toward this booth, Nat discovered a low mud wall fencing it off from the neighboring, smaller shops. Down the alley between the wall and Quong So's structure Nat caught a glimpse of a backyard crowded with desert ponies and idling men. He dared not stop to investigate, but passed on deeper into the bazaar. Here a Buriat merchant told him that Quong So just had received a pony caravan of silk goods, and the men had not yet left.

"Sui Lai's men, I'm betting," decided Nat. "Tonight I'll make sure.



THAT night Nat slipped out of the compound for a more thorough investigation.

Quong So's big, latticed booth of felted tent was an enterprise in itself, fenced in at the rear by the low mud wall which had its exit into the lonely, irregular, moon-lit

steppes. Through that back gate, Nat reasoned, an enemy could come and go on devious errands, screened by darkness or faint starlight.

Nat's heart took a jump as he saw the forms of horses in the shadows of the yard and heard mutterings as men moved among the horses. Every nerve tightened. He listened tensely. Suddenly he started, leaped aside from the wall and broke into a run. For he had heard the crunch of a pebble under a furtive foot only a few yards further down the wall and the sudden gasp of cursing breath. He had been followed, and death was to have been his penalty for this spying upon the enemy's stronghold. Being unaware as to the numbers of the foe the shadows of the low mud wall screened, Nat sought safety on the moonlit plain. Here in the open the enemy at least would be seen.

Other waiting enemies plopped out from the shadows at the end of the wall around which Nat had hoped to dash back toward the bazaar. Soon the fleeing American, almost surrounded, and making desperately for a boulder in the distance back of which to make his last stand, found the night hideous with the number of the foe.

He was picking out a target and had his revolver leveled when a lithe something looped over his head with a menacing swish. With a suppressed cry of horror he flung himself backward, and in the act of dropping ripped at the loop and managed to rid his neck of it just in time. He guessed that it was one of the horse-catcher's poles, fully seven feet long.

This mechanism was utilized ordinarily to fling a loop over the head of a wild horse. Once successful in such an attempt, the horse-catcher clung tenaciously to the end of his pole, flung himself skillfully from his pony, allowing himself to be pulled over the plain in a sliding position on his strong hide boots. Then, with a hand-over-hand he pulled himself along the pole until he could grasp the tail of the fear-crazed animal and hang to this until the horse stopped from sheer, nagging exhaustion. Nat had watched these Oriental horse-catching performances with great amusement and envy.

Now, instead of a wild horse, he was the quarry; and a dogged, clever foe was hauling himself quickly along the pole and toward him. In the moonlight he could make out the fellow. Nat lay flat, putting himself in such a position that the enemy would think he lay helpless in the toils of the pole noose.

"*Ai-eh!*" screamed the man, in an exultant, warning signal.

He held his knife poised. The horsemen, with suppressed yells, swept by, evidently satisfied by the helplessness of the American, leaving the one man to give the final blow, while they raced back toward the bazaar for other work.

Nat felt the pole loosen as the enemy turned for the thrust. With a quick leg thrust Nat kicked the dagger hand and then brought down the horse-catching pole with a crash upon the fellow's skull. Shrill cries came from the bazaar, and shots. Nat ripped the stunned brigand's quilted coat from him, and draped himself with it. He put on the fellow's turban and, thus disguised raced back to the bazaar. He reached it just in time to avoid the hoofs of the brigands' ponies, coming in a mad scamper from the quick, lawless raid.

When he entered the bazaar he found that an attack had been made on the Chinese merchants, and on no others. The attack had not been carried on long enough for the prince's soldiers to make any capture. One Chinese retailer had been wounded slightly. This was Quong So. His wound was a mere scratch and his loss only two small bolts of silk.

Nat had a theory about this raid. He had no doubt that the supposed successful attack upon his life had been instigated by Sui Lai. But the same enemy had turned upon Sui Lai's own countrymen. Why? Nat grinned, appreciation of the ambassador's infernal cleverness.

The prince verified that conclusion later.

"You see, my friend," whispered the prince after Nat had told of his discovery at Quong So's, "this is Sui Lai's method of preventing trouble. He was sure that you suspected the cloth merchant, Quong So. He knew that you were out, spying. So by this raid on his own people he can prove, can he not, that the attack on your life, and any future attacks by unidentified men are committed by outlaw, renegade Chinese? He is safe."

"He's a wily one, all right" admitted Nat. "But he's played right into our hands now. Another attack of his on me has blown up. I'm still in the land of bands and music, and Sui Lai must be in a seething temper. Now that I know his gang, I'm all ready to set my own trap for him. We've got to work fast. For with this gang of desert scum lying around, they may raid at any time. We've got to beat Sui Lai to it before we're goners, Prince."

OLLOWED a startling revelation of a plot among the Mongol soldiers against the prince's life. Buat Chad, an interise and loyal Mongolian colonel, discovered a Bolshevist paper with a known cipher in which fifteen of his soldiers were named definitely as participants in an insurrection that should end with the murder of the prince. Buat Chad called for an instant sentence of the traitors.

The prince acceded in a saddened and reluctant voice.

"They must suffer the criminal's death," he admitted.

Nat knew this penalty, so common to Mongolia, and shivered. The criminal is boxed up in a crate, carried on a cart to some wild, far isolation of the plain off the beaten course of the caravans, dumped and left there to die of hunger, thirst and the attacks of wild beasts. Inside the crate he is given no space whatever; he cannot even lift his hands when voracious desert flies bite through the skin of his eyelids.

The morning following the discovery of the plot the penalty was carried into effect. The doomed fifteen were boxed up tightly, and the death crates laid singly upon creaky old Mongol carts drawn by double-humped camels. The crates were covered with mourning shrouds, and thus the grim procession rumbled over ancient flagstones, through the mud gate, into the teeming bazaar of hushed, frightened people; and bore to northward toward the lonely, rock-strewn desolation of the Devil's Table. This lay over the horizon a two days' journey, at the slow pace taken. The thumping and screaming of the victims came to the ears of the solemn onlookers. Buat Chad himself with a large screen of cavalry escorted the procession for the disciplinary effects the grim journey would have upon any wavering ones among his soldiers.

The air in the monastery courtyard seemed permeated with the terror of brooding treachery. The lamas went about whispering to one another fearfully. The absence of most of the soldier garrison seemed to have left the place open to attack. The prince was depressed. He had a long talk with Sun Lai and the American.

"I am ill," he said. "I must get away to my physicians at Abassi. But first, before my court is broken up, and you," he turned to Sui Lai, "are left here without me as host, to await my return, the lamas will hold a service of special prayers for me at the *obi*. I cannot leave without that. It will take place this afternoon so that I can start away at once and spend tonight at Abassi.

Sui Lai concealed his pleasure at this news under an embroidery of silken words of sorrow and regret. He said that he would pray to all his ancestors for the prince's hasty recovery. Nat showed his gloom. He declared that he would do his best to have the lamas willing to work by the time the prince came back.

Only the higher caste lamas, the prince with a small bodyguard, Sui Lai without servants, and Nat, were to attend the special *obi* service for the prince. So the lamas had ordered it and so it was carried out. The *obi* hill was a conical mound to the west, dimly seen from the bazaar, and rising like a misty pyramid above the corrugations of the irregular Mongolian plain that stretched away toward the Siberian frontier.

On the way across the plain to this Mongol center of high religious feasts and princely ceremonial, the British consul from Abassi was intercepted on his way in to have a talk with the prince. He joined the guests. Nat had difficulty in concealing his delight at this acquisition of a witness and ally.

HE ceremony dragged along throughout the afternoon. The Europeans present stifled their yawns and waited patiently. Finally the sun began to go down and the bending, silk clad backs of the lamas straightened. A few tufts of long grass were added to the fluttering bouquets of such tributes stuck in vases on the knob of the *obi*. Then a ragged footman was seen approaching from the hillocks and rocks to the west. He seemed glad to find the American at the foot of the *obi*, and quickly gave his message. A small caravan of American machinery was on its way, and was camped for the night among the rocks of the Giant's Bowl, there over the rim of the hillocks.

This news created intense excitement in Nat and he demanded at once how many guards there were in the caravan.

"Alas," sorrowed the Mongol camelman, "between the drivers and the guards

there sprang up a gambler's quarrel, and the guards left when the caravan was two days from its present stopping place."

The man pictured the caravan in detail. Sui Lai listened as attentively as did Nat. There were seven double-hitches of camels to seven carts, and two crates of machinery to a cart. When questioned what arms the men had for guarding themselves against the brigands, the messenger declared that the carters had only their whips.

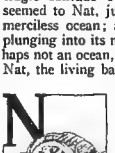
"Dangerous business, but I suppose it'll all be jake," muttered Nat as if to himself. "I'll ride out and get them into the monastery before dark. You go along, Prince; you've got to make Abassi." He gestured refusal when the prince offered to wait and see him safely in. "I'll put ginger into them. We'll be all right. Not far away."

The prince, together with the British consul, started at a slow pace for Abassi to the southeast of the monastery. When they had started away and were behind the hillocks, Sui Lai announced suddenly that it would be so lonely back at the guest tent without the prince that he would go southward to the neighboring Genghi and remain with the Chinese consul there for a day only. He asked Nat to inform his servants of his change in plan when the American arrived with the caravan.

Nat promised. He and Sui Lai started on their ponies, the Chinaman heading south, Nat riding for the western ridge of hillocks behind which lay the reported caravan of machinery. The ragged camel-driver ran after Nat and the latter slowed down in order not to fatigue the fellow unduly. He gave a glance around and saw the sun-glints on the silk-clad backs of the lamas moving back to the monastery on their horses at a rapid rate. Then his eyes took in the ambassador on his way south to see the supposed friend.

Nat peered over the rim of a gully and glimpsed Sui Lai's pony slowly but surely turning southwestward, in a close parallel to his own course, but one which could be screened in a short space of time by the hillocks and rocks. Just as the Chinaman's pony stood on a ridge in dark silhouette against the orange sky Nat was sure he saw the envoy lash the horse madly. With the suddenness of a meteor horse and rider dove over the ridge into the mystery and menace that lay waiting there.

Nat, with a grim, unflinching face, kept his pony headed due west toward the unprotected caravan of machinery. The conical *obi* hill lay far back and alone. The prince and his retinue had disappeared. The lamas must be within the distant monastery out of sight and sound. The vast, tragic solitude of the Mongolian plains seemed to Nat, just then, like a heartless, merciless ocean; and himself a tiny cork plunging into its many menaces. No, perhaps not an ocean, but a huge trap—and he, Nat, the living bait!



NAT raced ahead and came to the rim of hillocks, where he found himself looking down into an immense hollow, a mile in diameter, formed of eroded rocky sides and filled with huge lumps of rocks, white and resembling the last glistening lumps of sugar in a giant's bowl. The ancient, two-wheeled carts on wooden axles lay scattered over this rocky floor exactly as the same type of carts must have looked in the European mountain passes when Genghiz Khan carried his tents and accoutrements of war on them. The ponies and camels were huddled near the carts in charge of guards posted to keep them from wandering. Nat noted the perfect ambush the surroundings made.

Perhaps now, on that rocky rim to the south, furtive Chinese eyes were spying. At any moment the eager Sui Lai with his thundering men might break into the bowl for the final thrust.

The caravan men were crowded in a hungry circle around a dung fire, dipping their unwashed hands into mutton stew. They looked a frowsy lot and none of them had weapons showing. Nat ordered the camp broken at once. He flamed around the carts, pushing the caravan men into instant action. But the camels were vicious and would not work any more. The drivers tugged, and cursed, and flayed with whips, but the brutes squirmed back their lips, hissing nastily.

"All right!" shouted Nat. "We'll make the best of it, and spend the night here!" He sat down with the men, and listened to their chatter.

Suddenly there came the sound of tumbling rocks from the southern rim of the bowl, and as Nat arose, the spat of a bullet, followed by the crack of a rifle warned of the attack. Black forms like hurrying ants raced over the edge of the bowl, sending ahead the ping of bullets for their heralds; and the *crack, crack, crack!* of their rifles giving out the grim announcement of

annihilation to the ambushed caravan.

A devil's drum-beat sounded from the hoofs of Sui Lai's ponies. They pounded out the dirge of swift and certain death as they came like streaks of fate toward the undefended, trapped caravan. Sui Lai, no longer silk and laziness, had galloped into the van to make certain of triumph. He and his men wore gaudy robes that caught the wind and rippled behind like following flames.

Nat and his men, together with the horses and camels, were crouched down behind the carts. Not a shot had been fired in return. Then the trap was sprung: Nat's own, well-oiled trap, in which he was the bait! The sudden rumble from the carts might have been the warning thunder as the lids of the crates were flung back and gleaming guns in uniformed men's hands made their appearance. Other of the prince's soldiers at a command from Buat Chad leaped to their ponies and dashed off in a circling movement. And the innocent-looking caravan of machinery was seen to be a military ambush!

Close to the eastern rim of the bowl came a recognizable shout. Buat Chad and Nat looked up and realized that an unexpected audience was present. None other than Prince Abikar Khan with the British consul were on the scene as onlookers, and screened from bullets by a fort-like frontage of boulders over which they were popping their heads.

Sui Lai took in all this in one wild glance of comprehension. He yelled something to his men and then Nat knew that the fox was not in the trap yet. With a sudden, startling discipline the ambassador's men moulded into a wedge with Sui Lai in the middle; and, before Buat Chad or Nat could rally the thinned-out line of Mongols, that wedge was in swift, compact motion past a withering fusillade of shots. Still the mass held. The rain of bullets from four sides thinned the cutting edges relentlessly. Falling men were like chips pared off in the thinning down of a spear of wood. Nat saw the wedge speeding on, and huddling closer around the man, Sui Lai, for whose escape the common soldiers were willing enough to die.

Nat saw that what was left of the wedge soon would have Sui Lai past the faltering line of Mongols. Buat Chad ran a violent race with a platoon of men to cut off that wedge, but Sui Lai had the lead. Nat looked beyond, to the road the fugitive would have to take if he broke through the line. It was rough, upland going, strewn with rocks and bad enough even for a man without a fight for his life on his hands. Nat whipped up his horse and made a dash up the rim to one side of the bowl and found a narrow gully up which his horse scrambled. Sui Lai's men were making slower headway of it now

Nat kept out of sight and came in full gallop to the western outlet of the bowl. He was just in time. As he leaped from his horse and crept to the edge of a ledge he saw Sui Lai beneath him, with three men badly wounded trying to guard him from nipping bullets as Mongols leaped from rock to rock and carried on a sniping warfare, trying to place a wall of bullets at the head of the gully outlet. It was their last desperate chance, for they had many men wounded. Sui Lai's rifles had been used with devastating effect.

The last three slivers were peeled from the wedge just as Sui Lai had been carried to a bend in the gully. He gave a yell of rage as his last men toppled. The heroic enemy wedge had been whittled down to the last chip, now, but Sui Lai had been carried fanatically by it to within reaching distance of escape. Ahead of him lay the wild paths to the Siberian and Chinese frontiers. The Mongols had been shaken off.

The enraged Chinaman cut welts into his Siberian pony and the animal started into a pain-maddened rush. Nat was waiting with leveled gun. Sui Lai tried to fire first but the American's trigger finger worked faster. Sui Lai's pony toppled and flung his rider with stunning force to the rocky ground. Nat was on his prisoner in one spring. When Buat Chad, on a crippled horse, came into view, he found Nat busy tying up the Chinaman.

The case against Sui Lai was complete. Insofar as punishment was concerned, no Mongol had to transgress international courtesies. The Chinese themselves have ironical, efficient methods of rewarding their faithful agents who have been stupid enough to get themselves snared in their own webs of intrigue.

Prince Abikar Khan insisted on his treaty rights and expelled all the official Chinese from his kingdom until such a time as he chose to invite them back.

"And that, my dear American friend, thanks to you, shall not be until our new industrial enterprises are well settled in operation!" he concluded, smiling in relief.

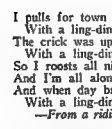
SEVEN GAY RIDERS

By ROBERT V. CARR

Reckless, carefree sons of the range, bred to the boisterous unrestraint of the frontier, were the Seven. Into their midst came the settler, and barbed wire fences, and the Law—and because the Seven could not understand, could not change, this story is told.

Chapter I

I pulls for town for a jamboree,
With a ling-ding and a di-do;
The crick was up to a gopher's knee,
With a ling-ding and a di-do.
So I roosts all night in a cottonwood tree,
And I'm all alone with myself and me,
And when day breaks, why, there I be!
With a ling-ding and a di-do.
—*From a riding song, by Jack Kingsford*



SLOWLY dismounting in front of the Cowboy's Rest, the Seven lined up, legs spraddled, thumbs hooked in belts, and stared in dumb wonderment at what to them was both a curiosity and a marvel—a locked saloon door.

The marshal, a poddy man, with small, nondescript features and a huge walrus mustache, came up; wagging his head and making vague gestures of disapproval. A long-barreled forty-five dangled from a belt sagging below the bulge of his abdomen. On his shirtfront glittered a bright new star.

"Everything's shut tight, boys," he informed them briskly, "tight as——"

At this juncture he raised his right hand, as though about to take a solemn oath. His small features retreated upward, the vast mustache lifted as though to entrap something, and then he sneezed, *ka-chee,* in a thin soprano.

The bronzed faces of the cowpunchers were as expressionless as the countenances of Sioux chiefs in council, but in their keen eyes glinted the light of devilment. Sizzling with vitality, intensely individualistic, clannish to no end, and with years of absolute freedom back of them, they could not be expected to regard the marshal with any reverence or respect. His type was new to them. He lacked the taciturn deadlines of the old-time officer. He did not know how to carry his gun, there was something comic about him.

Abruptly Dick Hawkes turned to Jack Kingsford.

"I would a-swore he was goin' to throw down five aces, but he only showed a two-spot sneeze. Did you ever see the like of it?"

"Can't say I ever did," Jack admitted sadly, "leastwise, not when sober."

When the marshal had recovered he rubbed his nose furiously with the back of his hand, craned his neck, pushed his hat forward, and struck what he conceived to be an attitude of official dignity.

Suddenly a gale of laughter swept the Seven. They executed grotesque steps and slapped their thighs and cuffed one another.

The officer stared at them, puzzled.

They were a strange breed to him. What were the crazy fools laughing at?

The laughter of the cowpunchers ceased as suddenly as it had begun.

"When did all this happen, Mister Marshal?" Dick Hawkes asked, with an exaggerated politeness which the officer accepted as a tribute to his importance.

The cowboy tightened his red silk sash, and set his straight-brimmed hat a-slant over one eye.

"You see," he drawled on, "we been over in Montana teachin' a few dogies how to behave, and ain't been in no town for a coon's age. We used to have a fair time in this here burg, and so we drifted back. Heard a lot of talk about how things were goin' over here, but figgered it mostly wind."

"No wind about it," the marshal was pleased to state. "A lot of new folks moved in with their families. They won out in the election. The council bein' against saloons wouldn't issue licenses, and there you be. Some claim the council can't do it, and that it's onconstitutional and all that, but you know what the feller said when they put him in jail. He said they couldn't do it, but he was in jail all the samee. As for the dance hall, it died a nat'ral death, as the new crowd didn't go much on it. The wide-open proposition is sure knocked in the eye in this town. New people, new idees, as the sayin' goes."

"But what they aimin' to do with their time?" asked the now really puzzled Dick. "Don't they want no high-steppin' a-tall? What's men to do who got money to spend?"

"No use to fuss about findin' a way to spend money," said the marshal drily. "The stores will take it, or you can put it in the bank. I never have no trouble spendin' mine."

"But that don't get us nowhere. If we'd a-wanted to fall asleep, we'd a-bogged down somewhere on the range. We ain't aimin' to buy out no stores or let the banker play with our money. What we've had in mind for months was a little jamboree. We want action."

The officer's expression plainly indicated that he believed the cowboy's mind was crumbling.

"You fellers must a-been asleep out in some coyote hole," he snapped. "Listen to this, no jamboree goes. Time was, I've heard, that this town wanted the cowboy trade; but we got other things to figger on now. Look at them new buildin's goin' up. All kinds of new people are comin' in. Didn't you see the breakin' plows workin' when you come in? I ain't been here a great while, but the country changes faster than I can keep up with it. I don't want to be hard on you fellers, but you'll have to look at things as they be now, not what they was two years ago."

"You're right about the country changin'," admitted Dick mournfully. "We had to ride five miles off our trail on account of the fences, and a nester charged us a quarter apiece for a meal of vittles. But we kind o' thought this old burg would hold to the old ways. This town used to welcome a cowboy's money. We always had a good time here. I swear I don't know what's got into the country. Outfits cuttin' down, nesters grabbin' the waterholes, and the town's gettin' so proper they ra'r straight back. I reckon that we'll soon have to go to shearin' sheep or close-herdin' chickens. A cowboy seems to be in the way these days."

He turned and waved his hand at a group of old-timers, lounging on the sidewalk.

"What do you think you're doin'?" he called. "Lettin' the grubs work out'n you?"

THE old-timers grinned, but made no reply. It was not their custom to "horn in." Also, secretly they were entertaining some hope that the riders would take the marshal down to the watering trough and duck him. The new order galled them not a little.

"There goes old Blinky Pete," remarked Jack Kingsford. "When old Blinky was marshal he used to have trouble with his eyes. Couldn't see nothin', and that's a fact. How come that old Blinky was turned loose?"

"He didn't get appointed," the officer said complacently. "A good man, but the mayor thought it was time to make a change." He hitched his gun around until it rested against his thigh.

"Now, I don't mind tellin' you boys that I've heard of you. Some of the old-timers said you would be droppin' in one of these days, but we might as well look at things as they be. I've heard of what you did to the officer up the road, and I'm here to say that no such shenannigans will go here now."

"We didn't hurt him none," Jack Kingsford declared, with an air of injured inno-

cence. "All we did was to pour a little licker down his neck, so he'd listen to reason. When we got him oiled up so he was limber and would carry easy, we took him out to the graveyard, laid him down and put a posy in his hand. We meant no harm, jes' a little play to while the time away."

"Call it play if you want to," growled the marshal, "but you can't perform here."

"And can't we get no licker?" mourned Dick.

"Nary a drop. Plenty of it in that saloon, but the owner can't sell it. This town is bone dry, if you know what that means."

"What stable did you use a fork in," demanded Jack Kingsford suddenly, "before you sunk to what you be now? Talk it, don't sneeze it."

The marshal's hirsute awning lifted angrily.

"You can't work any rowdy-dow remarks off onto me, and——"

"Don't mind him," cut in Dick, pretending to soothe the ruffled officer. "His ignorance is only exceeded by his lack of sense."

"My mistake," Jack hastily apologized, apparently humbled and abashed. "I spoke before I thought. I claim I never said it."

He began a little fancy dance, the while he sang softly:

"Long years ago I loved a gal,
Her name was Minnie Rounds;
I passed her quickly by today—
She'd gained four hundred pounds."

The song and dance concluded, he inquired suavely, "You don't mean to tell me the little dance-hall is closed? Don't say to me a cowboy can't swing a gal no more in this man's town."

"I told you everything was closed," barked the marshal, his temper rising. "And now, if you're goin' to stay, you can hand over your guns to me or leave them at the livery stable. You can't carry them around town."

"I might do that," said Dick Hawkes, as if considering some grave and weighty question, "but Jack there is so bull-headed. He's the top singer and banjo-player of the range, and he's got an idee that he's free to do as he pleases. I might give you my gun, but I'm afraid of that scoundrel Jack there. Seems like he has no sense. I see that you're right and that the town is right and everybody's right but me, but Jack there ain't got my brains under his hat. Like enough he wouldn't let you have his gun. Him bein' a friend of mine, though it's a disgrace to own it, I'll have to do as he does. Sorry, but that's the way the cards lay."

"I claim I'm through with this town," declared Jack savagely. "What for do I want to fool around a burg where you can't get no action?"

"Jes' as you want," said the marshal indifferently. "But if you stay, you don't pack the guns."

"Well, good-by, then," grinned Dick. He unknotted his silk handkerchief, and pretended to polish the officer's badge of authority. "Pretty little thing you got there—" he winked slyly at Jack—"but be careful you don't fall down on it and hurt yourself."

"Let that be!" snarled the marshal, peevishly flinging aside the cowboy's hand. "Keep your paws off me, I tell you, and go on about your business."

"Well, then, boys, we might as well be driftin'," said Dick, with an air of sorrowful resignation. "Marshal here, maybe, wants to go some place and sleep. Come on, let's hairpin the broncs, and get the hell out of here."

Each one then bade the officer farewell, shaking his hand vigorously and complimenting him upon his ability as a guardian of the peace.

For good measure, Jack Kingsford added, "And let me say that I've seen many a marshal, but I never saw one that had your good looks. You're sure there and over when it comes to a well-made face."

They clumped back to their horses.

"Let's jug him," proposed Dick Hawkes, devilment flaming in his eyes. "Pick him up on the run."

"I don't know so much about it," demurred Jack Kingsford. "Still, I'm as wild as you be, Dick. So, let's splatter!"

THEY sprang into the saddles. The marshal heard the drumming of hoofs, but supposed the cowpunchers were about to make a quick exit from the town. Naturally they would have to pass him to reach the range road. Therefore, he merely glanced over his shoulder as they charged toward him. They passed him; then, with a display of matchless horsemanship, whirled their broncos and swept back. Dumfounded by

this unexpected move, the officer made no effort to avoid the riders, but stood his ground, lacking the mental alertness to comprehend instantly the purpose of the riders' swift and skilled action. Two of them, bending over, seized his arms, snatched him clear of the ground, and raced on with him to the little calaboose at the end of the street. Some of his deputies saw the performance, but were unable to think of any form of rescue that did not offer strong probabilities of gunsmoke, a proposition they were not quite ready to consider. The old-timers on the sidewalk grinned their amusement. The newcomers made no move to interfere, for the reason that they considered it the duty of their duly appointed officers to preserve order.

Quickly the cowpunchers secured the officer's gun and keys. They unlocked the jail door, and heaved him in. Dick looked the door and pocketed the key.

"Now," cried that reckless child of the range, "let's grab Uncle Billy Shaver, and make him open the Cowboy's Rest." He glanced up the street, his keen eyes searching for the corpulent form of the old saloonkeeper. "There he is, in front of the Chink's."

Uncle Billy grinned a friendly welcome as the Seven flung themselves from their saddles and sprang upon the sidewalk. But when they seized him, and heaved him shoulder high, he remonstrated loudly and with considerable profanity.

"Here, here, what the hell you devils doin'? Let me down. What's the matter with you? Lookin' for trouble? Let me down."

But despite his struggles, they carried him to the door of his saloon.

"Open up, old boy," yelled Dick Hawkes. "We'll spend our money with you, but we want action."

"But listen, boys, a minute," pleaded the old saloonkeeper. "This is against the law. I want to get along with the people—I want——"

"Never mind the people," urged Jack Kingsford. "Get out your key, and open up. You wouldn't let us stand here, and die of thirst, would you? Open up the old shebang! We'll stand good for the damage."

By this time a crowd had gathered. Some banteringly encouraged the cowboys, others declared loudly that they should be arrested and put in jail. But before either group could take concerted action, the riders had secured Uncle Billy's key and opened the saloon door.

To one of the riders, Joe Pemberton, came a flash of forethought. He returned to the horses and led them up to the hitching rail in front of the saloon. He would stand guard, while his partners had their little play, lest all of them be set afoot at some critical moment.

Dick Hawkes and Jack Kingsford carried the old man into his saloon, and set him in one of his dusty look-out chairs. Then, assuring him that he would find money in the drawer for all whisky served, they sprang over the bar.

"Everything's on us," yelled Dick, as the crowd surged in after them. "Nothin' but bottled goods, but plenty of corkscrews! Help yourselves and pass it. Jack, you keep tally. Come one, come all! We'll show you how to be human! This ain't Christmas, but we'll make it look like it! Drink hearty, and forget your troubles!"

While many of the men in the noisy crowd did not approve of the proceedings, a drink or two changed their views. The old-timers welcomed an opportunity for a farewell spree, and the newcomers concluded that a few drinks on the cowboys would in no way sully their honor.

In the meantime, the marshal's deputies were battering down the jail door. When they had finally released their fuming chief, they were joined by some of the town officials and other supporters of the new order.

The supporters of the new order were in the majority, but not overwhelmingly so. They had won at the polls because some of the old-timers had tired of the highhandedness of the saloon and gambling element, and remained neutral at election.

BEING human, it amused the old-timers to see the cowboys defy the rule of the newcomers. While they would not have tolerated the man-handling of a marshal had they been in control, they now regarded the locking up of the officer in his own jail as a great joke on the newcomers. They were curious to see how the exponents of the new order would handle the situation. The opening of the Cowboy's Rest was another joke on the newcomers. They forgot that their old-time marshals went about with sawed-off, double-barreled shotguns

loaded with buckshot to quell just such disturbances, and through the mellow haze of memory they regarded the lawless antics of the seven riders as a pleasant resurrection of old-time horseplay. Therefore, each grinning old-timer within hearing of the clamor issuing from the Cowboy's Rest repaired thither to join the crowd and to reach for a bottle.

Jack Kingsford, keeping tally of the bottles, shook his head dubiously. The little affair would put a large dent in the combined wealth of the clan.

"Summer's wages shot to pieces, if we keep this up," he muttered. He whirled and yelled at Dick Hawkes who was passing out bottles to the crowd surging against the bar. "Hey, you cowboy, Dick, we'll be busted at this rate. Shut her off!"

"We'll clean up another dozen," laughed Dick. "Have a snort on me!"

Jack expertly yanked a cork from a bottle, and took a drink, and thereby missed counting a flock of pints.

"That one drink sure cost money," he said mournfully. "I gotta stick to business. Let's see, where am I?"

Now that the crowd was beginning to show the effects of its frantic guzzling, the amateur bartenders suddenly sickened of their jobs. They had given the town something to remember, the cash was in Uncle Billy's drawer, and there was no more devilment to bait their recklessness.

One of the town officials, struggling in the midst of the yelling mob, attempted to make a speech. An old-timer jammed his hat down over his eyes. One of the official's supporters struck the old-timer. Immediately a free-for-all fight started. Bottles were thrown, jaws thumped and tender toes mashed. Old quarrels and animosities flamed up. Men went down to be kicked and trampled.

The marshal was attempting to worm his way into the seething mass of men, but he might as well have waved a feather at a cyclone. He bawled threats, and screamed orders, but to no avail.

As for the cowboys, marooned back of the bar, they stared in mild wonderment at the mêlée.

"Sure no place for a respectable cowboy," Dick Hawkes yelled in Jack Kingsford's ear. "Scand'luss, ain't it? A sin and a shame!"

Jack flapped his hands in comic despair, and then made the Indian riding sign. Dick nodded.

Dodging the bottles that now and then whizzed past their heads, the six moved in single file toward the end of the bar nearest the doorway.

The marshal, failing to make any impression on the crowd, now turned his attention to the horses of the Seven. Joe Pemberton divined his purpose.

"Don't touch these broncs," he warned, swinging his gun. "You're not goin' to set us afoot unless you come through smoke."

The marshal had a gun in his hand, and was backed by several deputies, as well as a number of the town officials. He did not believe that the cowboy would shoot.

"Grab those horses," he ordered his deputies, "and take them to the stable."

Two of the deputies leaped into the street, and one made a move to seize the reins of the nearest horse. Immediately Joe pressed trigger, and the deputy reeled back with a smashed arm. The cowboy dodged back of a horse, but the animal plunged away from him, and at that moment the marshal fired. The cowpuncher slumped to the ground as though bludgeoned. And then the six burst from the saloon.

In a wild desperate scramble, the marshal and his men retreated to an opening between two buildings, but not before the lead of the six had sent an officer to join Joe in the Beyond.

The cowboys raced to their horses, and leaped into the saddles. For a moment, before they could get under way, there was a tangle of mane-flaunting, plunging, rearing broncos, with little wreaths of gun-smoke above their tossing heads, and then, as wild geese fly, the six bent over their saddle horns and swept out of town at whirlwind speed.

The rainbow tints of the jamboree had faded. Although the riders did not as yet fully realize the somber fact, the bright colors had given way to the thin, black shadows of the hangman's rope.

They had killed an officer to avenge the death of a partner; a deed, to them, highly honorable; but to the law, murder. Like the Sioux in his last stand, they were beating tiny naked hands against the iron-shod feet of Destiny—Destiny that reckoned no more of six gay riders than a man does of the ants beneath his heel.

CHAPTER II

If my foresight was my hindsight,
Said the horsefly to the flea,
What a wonder, what a wonder,
What a wonder I would be!
—*From a song, by Jack Kingsford*

THE sheriff, an old cowman, having only a few weeks to serve and being in sympathy with the cowboys, made only a pretense of searching for them. He knew where he could find them, but was careful to send them word that he was looking for them and to lead his posse in the opposite direction.

But his successor was a young man, and out to make a record. Immediately he posted rewards for the six, and organized a posse and combed the country.

"They've called for a show-down," said Dick Hawkes. "We got the choice of two moves—skip the country or take the long trail. I'm to blame for it all," he added sadly. "I should have had more sense."

"I'm not goin' to skip," growled Andy Deever. "If we're outlaws, we might as well be hung for the critter as the hide. Give 'em something to holler about."

Homer MacCloud, Jerry Flynn and Bill Emmons voiced approval of Andy's sentiment.

"Still, boys," counseled Jack Kingsford, "I'm thinkin' we're in a corner, and the best thing to do is to skip. Times have changed, and I'm beginnin' to see that we can't fight the whole country."

His sage counsel might have prevailed had not the young sheriff hove in sight at the head of a large posse. Not desiring any more bloodshed, the six made an effort to evade them. This move convinced the sheriff that his quarry was panic-stricken. He chased them into some rocky hills.

"What's the matter with that gazabel?" grumbled Dick Hawkes. "Don't he know we don't want any more trouble? Huh, the blamed fool is tryin' to throw a circle around us. Guess we'd better speak to him about it."

The posse had indulged in promiscuous, long-distance shooting, to which the fleeing cowpunchers had not replied. Thus the man hunters came up valiantly, and the sheriff sent forward a flanking detachment.

The six dismounted and prepared to make a stand.

"I'll call the horse," planned Dick, "then everybody pull down on the rider. We'll give 'em a taste of their own medicine. Spotted horse! All set! Shoot!"

A blast from the six rifles, and the man on the spotted horse, who happened to be the new sheriff, was swept out of existence.

"Black horse!" yelled Dick.

Again the rifle blast. A deputy went down to rise no more. This was too much for the man-hunters. They fell back in disorder.

The six now turned their attention to the flanking party. Their method of concentrated fire speedily accounted for two members of the detachment, which promptly fell back to the main posse.

The cowpunchers rode on across the hills. There was no turning back now. The rewards would be increased. Other posses would be formed. From now on they would be incessantly harried and pursued by men eager for blood-money and the distinction of the paid killer.

As they had anticipated, the rewards were substantially increased, and to the official handbills were added the ominous words, "Dead or Alive."

With cynical amusement the six read their descriptions. Since the sheriff had never seen them, they wondered how many of their supposed friends had hastened to the officer with the details.

Dick Hawkes, sometimes called "Handsome Dick." Height, five feet, eleven inches. Weight, about 170 pounds. Eyes, dark blue. Hair and mustache, light brown. Small hands and feet. Scar on left hand. Always neatly dressed, and generally wears a red sash.

Jack Kingsford, sometimes called "Singing Jack." Height, six feet. Weight, about 170 pounds. Eyes, blue, with dreamy cast. Hair and mustache, light brown. Small hands and feet. Scar on left hand.

Bill Emmons. Height, five feet, nine inches. Weight, about 200 pounds, heavy-set but not fat. Eyes, smoky gray and squinty. Hair, dark brown. Mustache, black. Walks with a slight limp, as left leg was once broken.

Andy Deever. Height, five feet, eight inches. Weight, about 140 pounds. Eyes, green. Hair, red and bushy. Face and hands freckled. Clean-shaven when last seen. Nose has been broken.

Homer MacCloud. Height, six feet. Weight, about 175 pounds. Eyes, light blue. Hair, light brown. Clean-shaven when last seen. Heavy cheekbones, and big nose. Ears stand out from head. Is a Scotchman but looks like a Swede. Bullet scar on left jaw.

Jerry Flynn. Height, five feet, seven inches. Weight, about 150 pounds. Hair, black. Eyes, dark blue. Clean-shaven when last seen. Stiff finger on left hand.

N. B. All of the above named men are under 30 years of age. They are first-class cowhands and may try to get work. Foremen are requested to hold them and notify the sheriff's office.

"It's sure a relief to a man to know perzactly what he looks like," was Dick Hawkes' quiet comment. "Accordin' to that load, Jack looks like me and I look like him. Which one's insulted, I wonder."

"That 'foremen are requested to hold them,'" observed Jack Kingsford, with a mirthless grin, "gives me a tickle. Wonder what they think we'd be a-doin' while the foreman was holdin' us? Settin' on his lap, I s'pose, and swappin' kisses."

CHAPTER III

A good pard never breaks you,
Never tricks you or forsakes you.
—*From a song, by Jack Kingsford*

THE successor to the sheriff the six had killed displayed no enthusiasm for service in the field. He sent out small posses in charge of deputies. These posses made little effort to locate the outlaws, finding it more convenient to loaf at the home ranch of some cow outfit. The six might easily have scattered and escaped, but their strong love of locality kept them drifting from one familiar range camp to another, and the intense clan feeling held them together.

Presently word came to them of the death of Uncle Billy Shaver. Thoughts of the old saloonkeeper brought to Dick bitter thoughts of the town that he and his partners believed, rightly or wrongly, according to viewpoint, had needlessly marked them with the brand of outlawry.

Money was getting low, and the law would not let them work and earn more. Then, why not pay the town a visit and give it something to squawk over? Its tight little bank was stuffed with money.

"I don't know so much about this bankustin' idee," Jack Kingsford debated solmnly, after Dick had announced his program. "Looks too much like crowdin' our luck, though I'd sure like to get another crack at that marshal and his bunch who downed poor Joe. We got some friends yet, prob'ly a few in the town, but if we hold up their bank, the town and country will be against us solid. No man is your friend after you've grabbed his money. You know that as well as I do, Dick. Men who run like sheep when their families are in danger will fight like tigers for their little old spondulics."

"Aw, shucks!" chided Dick. "Your imagination has got you down. You know what those newcomers will do—they'll hightail it, and you won't be able to see 'em for dust."

"I'm not foolin' myself, Dick. I don't like the idea a-tall. I say we ought to forget that burg, drift south, and start a new deal. We're playin' a losin' game here. Money don't last any time with us now, for everybody and his brother has their hands out for our money. S'pose we hold up the bank, then what? By and by, that money is gone. What then—another bank? You know I'm no quitter, and that my feet ain't cold, but I'm sick of this dodgin' and runnin'. I'd like to go some place where I could sleep without a six-shooter in each hand, where people would look at me without that sneakin', hangdog look I see in the eyes of most every man who claims he is our friend. You can't beat human nature. But," he added resignedly, "I'm with the bunch, come what may. If the bunch says clean the bank, I'll be at the cleanin'."

"Tell you what we'll do," compromised Dick, patting the gloomy foreboder on the shoulder. "We'll make this our wind-up, and then break for the mountains. Everybody will think we are hangin' around our old stampin' grounds. They'll never look for us in the mountains, and we can slip through to the south. Maybe we'll land in Mexico. That's a good, go-as-you-please country. Brace up; old Step-on-his-lip."

The quondam singer of cowland ditties stared somberly at the dying embers of the camp fire as his partners voiced approval of the proposed raid.

"I haven't had a song in my head for a million years," he muttered. "We ride to our finish."

They rode into the town one glittering western morning, and halted in the alley in the rear of the bank building. Andy Deever held the horses, while Dick Hawkes and Jack Kingsford entered the bank, and

Bill Emmons, Jerry Flynn and Homer MacCloud watched the street.

Dick Hawkes shoved his long forty-five into the face of the cashier, while Jack Kingsford covered two badly-frightened patrons of the bank. There was not a great deal of money in sight, but Dick managed to secure several hundred dollars in gold and silver.

Bill, Jerry and Homer, sweeping the street with rifle fire, covered the retreat of Jack and Dick.

The town now awoke to the fact that its bank had been robbed. Both old-timers and newcomers began firing from between buildings, from windows and from every point of vantage.

"It's the Hawkes bunch," the old-timers shouted. All friendship was now thrown into the discard by the pioneers. While they might condone the killing of a deputy-marshal, or even a sheriff, robbing a bank containing their money was a different matter.

The town was boiling over with excitement. The screams and shrieks of women mingled with the yells and curses of men. Shotguns exploded in double-barreled blasts, rifles swelled the battle chorus with their crackling rapid-fire, and sixshooters and pistols of every known variety barked and banged insanely.

Little Andy Deever was experiencing great difficulty in holding the six plunging horses, frightened by the pandemonium. The wildly excited animals jerked and hauled him about the alley. He caught a glimpse of the marshal with the walrus mustache, rising cautiously from the shelter of a woodpile, but he did not dare release his grip on the six pairs of reins, lest his partners and himself be left afoot to face the maddened citizens. The marshal gave Andy a load of buckshot, but the youthful outlaw did not relinquish the reins, though mortally wounded.

Jack Kingsford ran into the alley ahead of Dick Hawkes just as the marshal was about to pour another load of buckshot into Andy. Jack dropped the officer with a forty-five slug, and grabbed the reins. Immediately Andy slumped to the ground, shuddered a little, and died.

Homer, Bill and Jerry backed into the alley, firing. Dick, carrying the loot, mounted and sped away. The three in the mouth of the alley whirled and relieved Jack of his horse-holding job. He sprang into the saddle and raced after Dick.

Lead was whistling through the alley, and one of the three remaining horses was slightly wounded. His rearing and plunging gave the three outlaws several desperate moments before they could swing into thir saddles and get under way. They dashed up the alley neck and neck.

A little girl, who had been playing in some rubbish back of the hardware store, toddled into the alley and stared wonderingly at the three plunging horses and their low-bending riders.

They broke from line into column, but, fearful that the child might become confused and attempt to cross to their side of the alley, they flung themselves back in their saddles, throwing their horses almost on their haunches.

As they trotted past the child, Homer MacCloud admonished, "Run to your mamma, honey."

But this slight diversion spelled the doom of Homer. A fifty-caliber slug from a buffalo gun in the hands of an old-timer swept him from the saddle, to die, as had Andy Deever, in the dust and litter of the alley.

NO FURTHER casualties or mishaps marked the retreat to the mountains. Of course the rewards on the four survivors were increased. The town organized a posse; and the sheriff, under pressure of public sentiment, closed his office and took the field, valiantly declaring that he would either bring in the outlaws, dead or alive, or give up his star.

Contrary to Dick's belief that the man hunters would not look for them in the mountains, the sheriff, acting on information given him by settlers, established a camp in the foothills from which he sent out scouting parties to various points of vantage commanding the debouchments of the main canyons of the eastern slope of the mountains. As for himself, he remained in camp with a reserve of ten men.

The four found what they deemed a secure retreat, a little park at the head of a narrow canyon. They made their camp near a spring, and turned their ponies loose to graze. Deer and mountain sheep were plentiful, and raspberries were to be had for the picking. They would not starve, that was certain.

But they were not mountain men. To the riders of the range the peaks tha raised barren summits above them seeme grim and merciless jailors. At night th

whispering and groaning of the trees oppressed them. Often they sprang from their blankets, imagining they heard voices or the stealthy approach of some enemy through the brush.

They killed several deer and made "jerky." The money they had secured from the bank lay where Dick had carelessly dropped it. No man touched the sack of gold and silver or evinced any interest in it. Money, they now realized, was only valuable to men who could spend it.

There was little to do now except smoke and stare at one another. The clan spirit was still strong, but as the days passed each man became centered in his own thoughts. Yet there was little difference in their thoughts. Each one visioned himself riding through a haze of alkali dust or across barren gumbo flats, with tiny figures pursuing, always pursuing. Riding, riding, riding through gloomy canyons or over the dim game trails. Riding, riding, riding, and to what? And each answer was now the same. The finish! Sooner or later the vicious splut of lead, and oblivion.

And all because of a little play—a little jamboree. Surely the law was not only pitiless but dull-witted, making no provision for circumstances, heedless of the cause if the effect was contrary to its set dictums.

Inactivity and the oppressiveness of the mountain nights soon wore their nerves raw.

"We'll be talkin' to ourselves," groaned Jack Kingsford, "if we don't fog out of here soon. I'd rather die where I could see something than live forever here where I don't know what's comin' next. And I'm sick of deer meat, I'd give my hide for a square meal."

They decided to make an attempt to reach one of their old range camps. Surely they had some friends left who would warn them of the approach of officers. Anything to get away from the mysterious voices, anything to escape the sensation of being trapped like rats in a hole.

Under cover of darkness, now and then leading their horses over narrow game trails, they entered the foothills. Once they glimpsed the camp fire of a careless scouting party, and once they distinctly heard voices. They sought the cabin of an old range crony who had taken up a homestead in the foothills. He seemed loyal enough, for he prepared them a meal of bacon and eggs, sourdough bread and coffee which the four would have consumed to the last morsel though twenty sheriffs were on their trail. Then, since their tobacco was getting low, he gave them a liberal supply. But when they offered him money, he waved it aside.

"No, boys, I ain't that kind, but I'm free to say that the whole countryy is now against you," he explained. "There's been three different posses at my place in the last two days. They're sure aimin' to get you. You better start back for the mountains before daylight. The mountains is your best bet. Of course, you can see a bunch comin' for you on the prairie, but don't forget they can see you, too, in the open country."

Then he told them that the governor had declared that he would pardon them if they would come in and give themselves up, adding vaguely, "At least that's what everybody's sayin'."

But they only sneered, visioning themselves loaded with leg-irons and handcuffs. They would be shipped to the gallows or the penitentiary by a prejudiced jury. The governor was a politician, and distrust of the word of a politician was born in them. After the governor had trapped them, he would let the law take its course. He would forget his promise when once they were securely manacled.

Carefully refraining from giving their old crony any information concerning their destination or future plans, they rode away from his cabin as if seeking the open country, but when they were sure he could not see them, they whirled their horses and returned to the brooding loneliness of the mountains. Again the multitudinous voices of the mountain night, again the long, dark thoughts, again the unbearable nervous strain.

"We can't stand this forever," Dick Hawkes at last decided. "We must make a break and get out of the country. In Mexico or South America we can start a new deal. We'll try the south this time. Maybe we can dodge through."

His comrades nodded grim assent. They were soon threading their way through the wilderness. As they pressed on toward the south, they occasionally pulled in at the cabin of a prospector. Prospectors as a class are not interested in the affairs of towns and settlements, and few prospectors give any thought to law. The grizzled gold seekers welcomed the four riders, gave them food and shelter, but asked no questions. Yet prospectors talk, and talk travels.

TO THE sheriff guarding the southern flank of the mountains came word that four heavily-armed men, answering the descriptions of the outlaws, were heading his way. He prepared to receive them. He did not enter the mountains, but took up a position that commanded the mouth of a great canyon. He surmised that the riders would strike one of the many tributaries of the great canyon, and follow it down.

At the canyon mouth and beyond, countless floods had deposited huge boulders and masses of water-worn rock. Shortly before dusk, Jack Kingsford's restless eyes saw something move in a grove of cottonwoods beyond the boulders through which the four riders were leading their horses. They jerked their horses into the shelter of a great boulder that might have served for the foundation of a house, and awaited developments.

Presently a rifle spoke, and a bullet droned off a boulder back of them.

"They've introduced themselves," grunted Dick Hawkes. "Only thing to do now is to talk back."

They crept out to the center of a natural breastwork of boulders and opened fire. Immediately the posse showed its strength. Bullets fairly rained on the line of boulders back of which the four were crouched. The horses became excited, and one backed away from the shelter of the great boulder and went down, screaming and kicking.

The outlaws saw three men crawling toward a line of boulders facing their right flank. To stop the three they were forced to expose themselves. They killed one man, wounded another and sent one scrambling back to cover, but they lost Bill Emmons.

The three horses behind the great boulder, frightened by the struggles of the dying animal, broke from cover, sprang over the rocks like deer, and stampeded up the canyon.

There came a sudden gust of cool wind and a menacing rumble of thunder. The fire of the posse raised to a crackling chorus. For they feared the outlaws might escape under cover of storm-hurried darkness.

"They're gettin' ready for another sideswipe," gritted Dick. "Make every shot count!"

This time two men attempted to gain the shelter of the flanking boulders. The outlaws' lead stopped one and sent the other weaving back to cover—but a bullet had *sopped* between Jerry's ribs.

Then the storm broke, and darkness blotted out the scene. Nature, indifferent to the disputes of puny men, summoned the hail and the rain and the furious winds of the North.

The man-hunters, carrying their groaning wounded, and flinching under the stinging blows of the merciless hail, beat a stumbling retreat to a deserted homestead shack below the cottonwoods.

Pounded and bruised by the hail, panting and desperate, Dick and Jack managed to drag the gasping Jerry to the shelter of some trees beyond the first bend in the canyon. Luck had not entirely deserted them; for the hail abruptly gave way to torrents of rain, and a flash of lightning revealed their three horses in the shelter of a nearby group of trees, heads a-droop, backs humped to the storm. Jack secured the runaways.

Dick helped Jerry into the saddle, and led the way up the canyon. Jack, riding stirrup-to-stirrup with Jerry, offered a steadying hand.

"Leave me," groaned the doomed man, "I'm only a load to you. Bleedin' inside. I guess—no pain much—just hard to breathe. Leave me—I won't last long."

"Shut up!" growled Jack, in mock fierceness. "We'll pull you through." His grip tightened on the wounded man's arm. "Stay with it, old-timer! We gotta get a good start of them fellers, and then we'll make camp, and you'll be all hunkadory."

Recurrent flashes of lightning now revealed a dim road. This they let their ponies follow, for it was suicidal to turn up a tributary of the big canyon and attempt to reach the hills. Between them and the high country were countless sheer drop-offs and narrow, treacherous game trails, difficult enough in the light of the sun, but in storm and darkness offering nothing but death. The road would lead somewhere.

After what to them seemed interminable centuries of lashing rain, they glimpsed a light gleaming faintly through the thick murk.

"We'd better take Jerry down there," Jack suggested. "Prob'ly a nester's place."

They came to a worm fence surrounding a clearing, and followed it around to a pole-barred entrance near an open shed opposite the house. Dick jerked his rifle from the scabbard under his leg, dismounted, and threw back the light poles.

IN HIS sharp summons, an old man opened the door and stared stupidly at the dripping figure on the stoop.

Jack rode into the path of lamplight, sprang from his saddle and assisted the swaying Jerry to dismount.

"We've a man badly hurt," Dick announced briefly. "Want shelter for him."

The old man made no reply. Then, over his shoulder, appeared the face of a girl, framed in thick golden braids.

"My grandfather doesn't understand English," she murmured apologetically. Gently she pushed the old man aside. "You are welcome to our house."

They entered, and, under her directions, half-carried Jerry to a bed in the corner of the big room.

"Let me help you," she offered sympathetically. "What do you need first?"

"Long bandages and hot water," Dick told her.

While she was preparing the bandages and filling the tea kettle, the two outlaws quickly undressed their wounded partner, cutting away with their knives the garments they could not easily remove. Gravely they examined his wound.

"How does it look?" Jerry asked.

"Not bleedin' much," Jack informed him.

"Thought so. Cloggin' up inside me—won't let me breathe."

"You'll be all right in a little while," soothed Jack. "We'll soon have you fixed up."

But the iron determination that had carried Jerry through the storm soon gave way to soft sentiment. Perhaps the girl, bending over to smooth his pillow when at last his wound was bandaged and he was between warm blankets, roused memories of childhood. He looked up at her with humble adoring eyes.

"My maw had just such yellow hair," he moaned. "She was like you—so kind." He found Jack's hand and clutched it tightly. "Stay with me, Jack. You've a heart that knows—I don't want to go out—alone."

Dick drew back from the bed and glanced about him warily. He noted the one window, and two calico-curtained entrances to what appeared to be bedrooms, partitioned off the big combination living-room and kitchen. Apparently the great black-mouthed fireplace, set in the wall opposite the doorway, had been reduced to the status of an ornament by the shiny cook stove in the corner nearest the window.

"Only one door to this place?" he asked the girl.

She came over to him, and for a moment studied his bronzed, handsome face.

He became conscious of some subtle magnetism drawing him toward her. The sheen of her eyes in the lamplight disturbed him. The glint of her golden hair seemed to possess some mysterious power to distract his stern thoughts.

He threw off the spell of her beauty, and said shortly, "We might have to get out of here in a hurry, and one door sort o' puts us in a hole. But we'll have to stay here for a while." He glanced somberly at Jerry.

She nodded her comprehension. "There is a window in one of the bedrooms," she quietly informed him.

"You might as well know we've had trouble with the law," he told her, avoiding her disturbing gaze. "We had a fight at the mouth of the canyon, and lost a man and a horse. The other three horses stampeded, but we run onto them in a glare of lightnin', when we pulled back in the dark of the storm. But don't think we aim to give you any trouble."

"I'm not afraid of that," she quickly assured him. "I will get you something to eat. You will find hay in the shed for the horses."

The old man was shuffling into one of the bedrooms. The girl caught Dick's questioning glance.

"He's going to bed. We often stay up late. I read to him from some old Norse books. My father is away; he will be gone for two weeks. We have few visitors."

"You're mighty kind," Dick said softly, sidling toward the door. "We won't bother you any more than we can help."

He opened the door and slipped out quickly. Leading the horses into the shed, he unbuckled the left cheek straps that the bits might swing clear of the mouths, and threw some hay in the mangers.

On his return, indifferent to the swishing rain, he halted near the window, and watched the girl as she placed a stick of white pine in the stove. The calm loveliness of her face, deepened by the firelight's glow, brought a pang of longing to his lonely heart. A yearning for the comfort of a home and the solace of a woman's love overwhelmed him. With such a woman to make a home for him, he would patiently endure any hardship, gladly face any dan-

ger. One thing he would do, he was quite sure. On stormy nights he would have the big fireplace blazing. He and the kids—maybe a couple of good-looking boys and a little love of a golden-haired girl—well, they'd roast apples and pop corn and make candy and——

But no. He came back to grim and merciless reality. There was Jack holding Jerry's hand—Jerry, with a hole in his side. Joe was gone—Andy, Homer, Bill. Jerry, too, would soon take the dark trail. All gone, with no sons to bear their names. Sooner or later Jack and he would follow them into the Unknown.

He turned and stared into the murk. The thing to do was to move on. But Jack would not leave Jerry as long as he could give him any comfort. What a heart old Jack had.

Go on alone? No—never! A man who was a man stayed with his partners.

Chapter IV

Don't mourn for me when I ride no more
The ranges of the West,
But just remember my heart was right,
And sort o' forget the rest.
—From a song, by Jack Kingsford

THE storm had ceased. Faintly to the watchers at the bedside came the sound of dripping eaves and the *sir-r-ring* of the pines. They suddenly became aware of the ticking of a clock on a shelf near the stove. It seemed to be beating time with the faint gasps of the dying man.

The old Norwegian came from his bedroom, yawning audibly, and seated himself in an ancient rocker in front of the stove.

"These men are breakers of the law, my Freyja," he said in Norse, opening the stove door and holding his palms close to the glowing embers. "What will you say when the sheriff comes?"

"I will say," she answered quickly, in the same language, "that these men came seeking shelter for their wounded comrad. You, Papa Jolnir, shall not speak or make a sign. The sheriff will not blame us for giving shelter to a dying man."

"And the others? Why do they not leave the dying man? They cannot give him a moment more of life."

"They remain to comfort him. They are true men and brave."

"You speak too gently of them, my little one. Yet your way is my way. We shall not betray those to whom we have given shelter."

At dawn Jerry was still alive, grimacing terribly as he strained his neck muscles and cords in desperate efforts to force air into his blood-clogged lungs. For hours he had been clinging to Jack's hand, fighting for the breath of life. Jack, stiff and numb from holding a fixed and cramped position, knew that he and Dick should be moving on, but he could not steel his heart to the point of pulling free of the hand that so tightly clutched his.

"Old Jack won't leave poor Jerry," Dick told the girl gloomily. "I can't say I want him to, but we should be gettin' out of here. I hope, after we're gone, that you'll forget all the things I told you last night. We haven't seen any women for a long time, and it seemed good to talk to you."

"Perhaps you will be coming back this way some day," she smiled hopefully.

"Then you don't hold it against me for bein' on the dodge," he said, in low, eager tones. "After all I told you, you still think me and my partners are square men?"

"I do not think that you are bad," she softly admitted. "You have broken the law, but then, it is not a sin to fight. My grandfather says that our people in the old days were great fighters, and that they loved to hear the swords hiss."

"Them days are gone, I guess," he muttered; and relapsed into gloomy silence.

Presently he picked up his rifle, and opened the door. Slowly he pressed cartridges into the magazine, while he stared somberly at the road that wound around the fence and into the pines beyond the clearing.

He heard Jack say to the girl, "I think poor Jerry is about gone. His hand is gettin' cold."

Then he glimpsed the head of the posse as it rounded a turn in the road.

"Here they come!" he yelled, and sprang through the doorway.

The posse charged down the road, firing wildly, but by the time it had turned the corner of the fence, Dick, swinging from his saddle like an Indian, had dashed through the gate and gained the shelter of some jack pines beyond the shed.

The sheriff, noting the two saddled horses in the open shed, deduced that there were yet two of the "wanted" men in the house. He ordered three of his men to follow the trail of the fleeing outlaw, and

halted his remaining man-hunters at the gate.

"Get down," he shouted, "and surround the house. There's two more in there."

They flung themselves from the saddles, and began scattering out, in search of points of vantage.

But at that moment a golden-haired girl strolled from the house, sauntered to the woodpile between the windowless end of the house and the gate, and began picking up sticks. The man-hunters halted, questioning eyes on their chief.

The sheriff strode over to the girl.

"Good morning," she sweetly greeted him, arranging the sticks on her arm.

"Who's in the house?" he gruffly demanded.

"My grandfather and a dead man," she answered simply. "My father is away."

She resumed her wood gathering. "Won't you come in?"

"Jake," the sheriff called to one of his deputies, "you and two of the boys come with me. She says there's only a dead one in the house." Then to the girl, "Go ahead; we'll have a look."

She shrugged her shoulders slightly, and turned slowly and led the way past the corner of the house. Bending nearly double, the four men followed her past the window. At the doorway the sheriff paused, for he was a cautious man. "It is as I told you," she assured him over her shoulder. "Come in."

"Stand to this side of the door," he ordered.

She obeyed, smiling a little.

Cautiously he craned his neck and peered around the door jamb and over her shoulder.

"Come on," he grunted to his men. "Look sharp, though."

Quickly they slipped through the doorway, and glanced about the big room with cold, suspicious eyes.

THEY made a careful search of the bedrooms and the big living room. The sheriff even looked up the chimney of the fireplace and into the flour barrel. Finally he clumped over to the bed and flung back the blanket from Jerry's quiet face. He lifted one of the hands crossed on the dead outlaw's breast. "Dead, all right," he muttered, releasing the limp hand.

"How come," he asked the girl, "there were three horses and only two men?"

"I heard the man who got away say that one man died in a cave," she lied steadily, "and that his horse followed them like a dog. I gave the man who got away something to eat and some hot coffee. That made him friendly, and he talked quite a little. He told me they had a fight at the mouth of the canyon and that a man and a horse were killed and two men wounded. In the fight their horses ran away. When the storm and darkness came, he helped the wounded men up the canyon a little ways and went to look for the horses. He found them—the lightning showed them to him—and he took them back to the wounded men. They tried to reach the high country, but he had to stop because one of the wounded men could ride no further. In a glare of lightning, he saw a cave nearby. He took the wounded men into the cave and they stayed there until one of the wounded men died. Then the two tried again to reach the high country, but it was so dark and stormy that they lost their way, and drifted back into the big canyon again. The wounded man, in the rain and cold, was getting worse all the time. So, when his friend saw our light, he brought him here."

"What time did they get here?"

"About four o'clock. Grandpa always gets up very early, and so do I, to get his breakfast."

The sheriff mentally checked up her story with the events of the fight. He concluded that she had told him the truth, but, nevertheless, he turned to the old man in the rocker.

"What do you know about this, Grandpaw?"

But the aged Norwegian only stared at him dully.

"He doesn't speak English," the girl explained.

The sheriff grunted comprehension. "An old dumbhead," was his thought. Yet a new question arose in his suspicious mind.

"How come the one who got away didn't move on as soon as he got his partner under shelter here?" he asked.

"The dying man asked him to stay," she replied gently, "and to hold his hand. The man died a little while before you came."

"Well, boys," grumbled the sheriff, "we're out the rewards on one man. No use to look for him; million caves in this country. Rope this one on one of them horses in the shed. Leave the other horse for the girl here. She's entitled to some-

thing, and can use the pony to round up her milk cows."

His nose wrinkled in a sneer, as the three men he had sent in pursuit of the fleeing outlaw entered the room and lined up near the door.

"Where you been all this time? Pickin' flowers, I reckon. You been gone almost long enough to turn 'round. Why the hell didn't you keep after your man?"

"Lost his trail," one reported sheepishly.

"Didn't even get a shot at him. Rocky country. Didn't think it much use to lead our horses 'round over rocks."

The sheriff's eyes were on the girl, as the easily-discouraged man-hunter finished speaking. He noted the expression of relief on her face, the glow of happiness in her eyes. It was very apparent to him that she was rejoicing at the escape of the outlaw. A foxy glint came into his deep-set eyes.

"Move now, boys," he ordered briskly. "We'll be hittin' it back for town. We got three of 'em anyway, though I would a-liked to have made a clean sweep."

When his men had carried the fifth of the seven gay riders from the house, he casually remarked to the girl, "I s'pose the one who got away was a young man."

She nodded affirmation.

"Did you look at him close? What kind of a lookin' feller was he?"

"He was very nice looking," she admitted innocently, the betraying glow returning to her eyes. "He had beautiful dark blue eyes, and very white teeth, and he wore a red sash."

"Then he's not the one we wanted most. The one we wanted the worst was a homely feller and mighty mean with women."

"This man was not homely," she defended the absent one a little breathlessly. "He was very good looking, and he would not harm any woman."

The sheriff grinned at her. How easily he had trapped her with words. He now knew that she had a tender interest in the outlaw, and it was his belief that no young man ever failed to respond to the love of a beautiful woman.

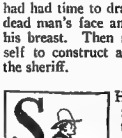
As he bade her farewell, he mentally congratulated himself on his cleverness. Women were pretty sharp, he thought, but he was just a little bit sharper.

The girl leaned against the door jamb in an attitude of seeming indifference, but her eyes were anxiously following tthe posse as it straggled around the worm fence. The sheriff had a long leg hooked about his saddle horn. She could see the smoke of his pipe rising on the clear morning air. He was well satisfied with himself, highly pleased with the result of his lethal labors. His men were lounging in their saddles, talking and smoking. The horse bearing the body suddenly shied from the road. She heard the man who was leading the animal curse viciously. The dead man, jackknived over the saddle, seemed to be searching for something in the road. She sighed her relief as they disappeared in the pines.

She pondered the questions the sheriff had asked her. Had he suspected that she had lied about the third man? She gasped as she realized that by defending the character of the man who had escaped she had betrayed her deep interest in him. The sheriff had some veiled purpose in questioning her. She was unable to discern his hidden motive, but she decided that she must be very cautious.

The sheriff was a cunning man, yet he had failed to make a thorough search of the fireplace. Had he scraped the ashes back, he would have found an iron hearth, and under it a hole in which her father sometimes cached provisions and valuables. Had he lifted the hearth he would have found Jack. It had been quick, desperate work. The man on the bed had died a few moments after the sheriff and his men had ridden from the timber. Jack, stiff and numb from his long vigil, had been unable to move quickly. Before he could seize his rifle, the posse had begun firing. Then she had thought of the fireplace, and prevailed on him to drop into the hole beneath its iron floor. Carefully she had replaced the sheet of iron and covered it with ashes from the stove.

But, after all, so swiftly had she worked, she had had several minutes to spare. She had had time to draw the blanket over the dead man's face and to fold his hands on his breast. Then she had composed herself to construct a plausible story to tell the sheriff.



SHE saw the last horseman disappear in the timber, yet a vague uneasiness stirred in her breast. She resolved not to release the man under the fireplace until nightfall.

She secured her shining milk buckets and slowly walked out to the cow corral. A cat and several kittens, the whole feline crew meowing hungrily, came from a

hole under the low stoop, and trailed after her.

As she milked, she watched the road that led along the worm fence and down the canyon. Presently her keen eyes caught a flash of steel in the brush beyond the road. Surely it was not the weapon of the outlaw who had escaped. He had ridden in the opposite direction. Ah, the sheriff had not gone on to town. He suspected something and was watching the house from covert.

She drove the cows from the corral and for a short distance down the road the posse had taken. Then she returned to the cats who were threatening to storm the milk buckets. She poured out a generous allowance of the milk into an old tin pan, and pretended to play with the kittens. But she was covertly watching the cows as they neared the spot where she had seen the flash. She saw them halt abruptly, raise their ears and stare with bovine fixedness at something in the brush. Then, as if a stone had been thrown at them, they tossed their heads and ran down the road.

"They circled around and came back to watch," she muttered. "But let them watch; they can do no harm."

Sure now that the sheriff and his posse were watching her every move, she entered the springhouse. There she strained the milk into wide pans and set them in the cold spring water. Then she returned to the house to prepare breakfast for her grandfather.

"The sheriff and his men did not return to town," she told the old man in Norse, as she set the coffee pot on the stove. "They are hiding beyond the road. I saw sunlight on iron, and a little later the cows took fright at the hidden men."

Her grandfather smirked at her, and cackled thinly.

"You have a mind as sharp as the edge of a good ax, my Freyja, but the young man who escaped took your heart with him. Even my old eyes saw that. Perhaps the sheriff knows that young men always come back to a maiden whose hair is like gold and whose eyes are as blue as those little flowers you bring me in the spring. Perhaps that is why the sheriff waits."

The ancient one was not so dull-witted after all.

She shook her head sadly. "No, Papa Jolnir, the young man will not return. He does not care for me."

The old man smiled vaguely, and relapsed into his seemingly vacant, senile musings.

The girl, as she prepared breakfast, let her mind travel the dream-trails of the future. Perhaps some day, when all danger was past, the man who had escaped would return. It would be very pleasant to have some one near one's own age to care for—to love. Yes, he would come back to her, and look at her the way she wanted him to look at her. They would go to some far country, if necessary, and there— Ah, they would be married! Her father and Papa Jolnir would come to them. How happy they would be! In time there would be babies to fondle—babies who would grow up into beautiful girls and strong, clear-eyed, fearless boys.

Then she sighed. It was all a dream, but a very pleasant one—very pleasant, very sweet.

With the coming of night, she lighted the lamp. Then she realized that she must wait until her natural bedtime to release the man under the fireplace. For her to extinguish the light suddenly would seem strange to the watchers beyond the road. If she released him while the lamp was lighted, there was danger of one of the sheriff's men creeping up to the uncurtained window. She might cover it with a blanket, but that would be a move the watchers would question.

For a time after her grandfather had gone to bed, she busied herself about the house, singing as she worked. She then sought the doorway, and pretended to scold the kittens, the while her eyes searched the gloom. Beyond the shed, she saw a group of vague shapes. Apparently the sheriff had not encircled the house with guards, but was holding his men at a point that commanded the door. Admonishing the kittens to "sleep tight," she closed and barred the door. She carried the lamp into her bedroom, and, after a moment of breathless listening, blew out the light. She could hear her grandfather snoring in the adjoining bedroom, a familiar sound that somehow comforted and reassured her. She tiptoed into the living room and secured a pitcher of milk and some sandwiches.

She was soon whispering an account of the events of the day to her guest under the fireplace.

"You will have to stay here," she concluded, "until the sheriff gets tired of watching the house and goes away."

"But Dick might come back," conjectured Jack, "while the sheriff is watchin'.

You've put the love brand on him, and he might try to see you, thinkin' the sheriff had got me and gone."

"We can only wait. Good night."

"It's sure lonely in this hole, girl. I hate to see you go. Thanks for the chuck."

She stretched out on the floor, and swung an arm in the hole. Her exploring fingers found Jack's shoulder. "Good night," she repeated, sympathetically.

She felt his fingers on her wrist, and then his lips against her palm.

"For friendship's sake," he whispered. "Don't worry. Dick will come back some day, and the birds will sing for you. Good night."

THE next night, when she raised the iron oblong, Jack was so glad to hear her voice that he exclaimed in normal tones, "Suff'rin' cripes, girl, talk about solitary confinement."

"Sh-h-h!" she sibilated. "The sheriff is still watching!"

"Tell you what you do," planned Jack, after she had given him food and drink. "Help me out of here a little before daybreak. Chances are the sheriff will move back beyond the road before daylight. Is there some landmark near here?"

"Yes; a big white rock west of here."

"I'll make a break before daylight. You can bring my horse to the white rock when the sheriff gets tired and goes away. Will you do it?"

"Yes; but I am so afraid."

"Nothin' to be afraid of; gotta take the chance." He gave her hand a playful tug. "Heap *wasti* dreams. Shut the lid on your groundhog."

The girl slipped into her bedroom, and seated herself near a rawhide-covered opening that served for a window. Intently she thought of the man who had come in out of the storm and won her heart. Love was like a fire—ashes and embers for a long time, and then a sudden flame. Or, perhaps, love was like the tiger lily that slept the winter through, and then under the summer sun came to sudden bloom. But no, the tiger lily withered and died in a little while, but love never died.

She flung herself down on the bed. Where was the man of her dreams? A terrible fear suddenly clutched her heart. Perhaps he had been wounded as he fled from the main posse. Perhaps he was dying in some lonely canyon, or, perhaps he was already dead. Why had she not thought of that before? Oh, he would never return to her! Then she gasped, and sat up on the edge of the bed. Some one was scratching on the rawhide curtain.

She arose and tiptoed over to the opening.

"Who is there?" she queried fearfully.

"Dick—the man who got away."

She raised the curtain; gasping. "Quick, the sheriff is watching!"

For a moment the outlaw hesitated, then he swung up into the opening and dropped noiselessly to the floor. Love will not be denied even in the shadow of death.

"I just had to come back to you," he murmured. "Something pulled me back." His arms were around her now. "I know it's wrong for me to love you—I can bring you no good. But I had to come back—I had to come back. Lonely out there, with all my partners gone. I had to take a chance. I couldn't stay away from you."

Being a primitive woman, Freyja saw no need of words. Her strong, young arms closed around his neck. This was her man, and he loved her. Though the rifles again sang their hateful song, she would have the memory of his arms around her and his kisses on her lips.

Blindly the man surrendered to her mood. Deadly danger gave a poignant sweetness to the love that enthralled him.

"What's ahead of us, girl?" She could feel the shudder that ran through him. "Will you come to me—if I get out of this?"

He felt the lips against his cheek quiver.

"Anywhere in the world."

"Jack! What happened——?"

"I hid him in a hole under the fireplace."

"Get him out. He'll make a break with me. They didn't see me or they'd have shot. I'll stay here and watch the window."

"There's a little ladder that belongs in the hole—my father left it outdoors. I was afraid to bring it in. We'll have to pull him up."

"I'll use my sash," he decided. "Go ahead."

But when Dick had hauled him from the hole, Jack gave his rescuer no fond greeting.

"Whatcha come back for, gumbohead, when you was safe and in the clear?" he hissed, as he jerked the silk sash from his partner's hand.

"I thought——"

"He came back to me," the girl quickly interposed, "He was lonely and——"

Then, like the summons of doom, came the harsh bellow of the sheriff.

"Come out and give yourself up! We saw you in the window. We didn't shoot for fear of hittin' the girl. Girl, you and the old man come out. We'll burn the place if that cuss don't give up!"

Freyja seized Dick's arm and dragged him to the edge of the fireplace. "Drop in the hole," she panted, "quick, quick!"

Frantically intent on saving the man she loved, she gave no thought to Jack's safety.

His mind confused with wild and desperate thoughts, Dick permitted her to pull him down; but, as his legs dangled in the hole, he regained his mental equilibrium.

"I won't hide and let Jack take the worst of it," he resolutely declared. You and your grandpa get out. We'll make a stand." He groped for her hand. "Oh, girl," he said huskily, "this is good-by!"

BUT Jack Kingsford, one-time gay singer and banjo-player, had another plan. He pushed the unsuspecting Dick into the hole, and quickly set the oblong of iron in place. Then he tied his partner's red silk sash around the waist.

"What are you going to do?" she gasped.

"Make them think I'm Dick. They believe your story—they think there's only one man left. I'll be that man. Dick and me look alike. I got on his sash. It will save him for you. Farewell, and I wish you well."

"Come out and give yourself up!" the sheriff bellowed.

"He'll never die of throat trouble, that gazabel," Jack commented, with a flash of his old gay spirit.

In sudden comprehension of the terrible sacrifice he was about to make, she flung her arms around his neck.

"Oh, don't—there must be some other way!" she sobbed. "I can't let you do this! Your life for our happiness—no, no!"

Desperately she clung to him, as he moved resolutely toward the door.

"Kiss me good-by, little friend," he said in calm, natural tones, as he unbarred the door, "and get back against the wall. The logs will protect you."

She kissed him. He felt the warm tears on her cheek. They were not love-tears, he thought sadly. Just the tears of a tender-hearted girl for a friend who was about to take the dark trail.

"I'm tellin' you the last time," came the final warning bellow, "come out and give yourself up!"

The erstwhile singer of gay riding songs pushed the girl from him. She reeled back along the wall, and sank to the floor.

Bending low, as though about to brave a blinding storm, he flung back the door and plunged out.

Loudly the pitiless rifles sang their bitter song of death.

A clamour, harsh and exultant, an interval of silence, and then, "Hold that blamed bronc's head, can'tcha! Now up with him! Here's the rope."

"He's the one they call 'Handsome Dick.' Wanted to get his sash to give my best gal, but somebody beat me to it."

"He sure died game. I saw him when he killed the sheriff. He must a-been sieved with lead then."

"The sheriff was right about waitin' for him to come back to the girl, but he didn't guess the finish. I claim it's no use to figger. You figger and figger as much as you will, and then, blam! comes the finish you never thought could be."

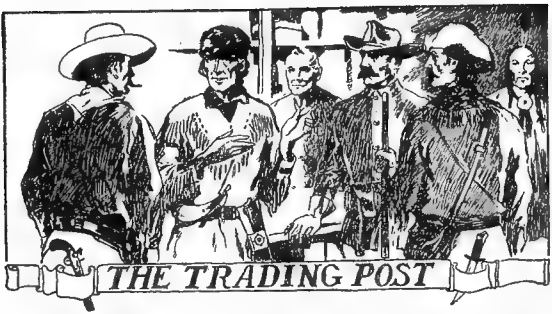
Then sounded the plomping of many hoofs, and rough voices slowly diminishing to a murmur, until, at last there was only the plaint of the night wind in the pines.

Slowly the girl rose to her knees. Tightly she pressed her hands to her breast, as if to hold in her heart something that was infinitely precious. In broken, moaning whispers, she voiced the requiem of the brave.

"We shall never forget. We shall love his memory—forever—and forever."

WYOMING

IT MAY truthfully be said that very few Indian names which we have adopted and applied to geographical or other features are so nearly like the aboriginal forms in pronunciation that the Indians would recognize them as uttered by us. One of the most glaring examples of corruption is the Delaware Indian word "M'cheuwómink," meaning "upon the great plain" which we have changed to "Wyoming," a more pronounceable term to our ears, to be sure, even if not linguistically correct. Indeed, the euphonious character of the name was the primary reason why the founders of the territory of Wyoming transported the word from Pennsylvania to the Northwest.—F. W. H.



A FRONTIERSMAN PASSES

IN THE old days it was an old trapper or trader, coming in after months spent on the plains and in the wilderness, who brought word to the trading post that another old-timer had started on the last long trail. Nowadays the telegraph and the newspaper bring the news; and, long before we have this opportunity to gather in the Trading Post, you know that Bill Tilghman, a real old-timer of the Old West, one of the last of the old frontier marshals, recently went to his death in Oklahoma while upholding the law for which he always stood. With the passing of Bill Tilghman the West loses one of its grand men, one whose life was an epic of action and frontier development.

William MacLeod Raine, a great admirer of Mr. Tilghman, wanted to tell the old frontiersman's story—and he has done it well. In an early issue of THE FRONTIER Mr. Raine's fine article will appear.

Meanwhile we are fortunate in being able to publish in this issue "Day's End," by Zoe A. Tilghman, who is no other than Mrs. Bill, widow of the deceased pioneer. Of the man whom all the West honored, she says, "In all his great life there were no regrets, and we have only precious and beautiful memories to keep. In life and death he was worthy of those words which were read over his body, written for another great soldier of right: 'I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith.'"

Mrs. Tilghman is a pioneer herself, the descendent of frontiersmen, as are many of our most popular FRONTIER writers.

"I was Zoe A. Stratton, born in Kansas, educated in a Kansas town, on an Osage cattle ranch, and at the University of Oklahoma," she writes. "My father was a stockman. He drove the third herd of cattle up the Chisholm trail, and drove one of the last trail herds, in the summer of '87, the year the Santa Fe built across the Territory. My people on both father's and mother's sides have been pioneers for three hundred years. Between cooking and housework, three boys who are Tilghmans, looking after stock and business when my husband was away, a moderate amount of club and church work, an occasional tea or social function, and some slight dabbling in our (of late) hectic Oklahoma politics, I sometimes try to write, both prose and verse."

A WORD FROM TEXAS

DROPPING a bit farther South from Oklahoma brings us to the Texas home of Walter Prescott Webb, who, in collaboration with General Barton wrote the editorial on "The Texas Rangers" which appears in this issue.

"It is especially interesting to me, a Texan, to note that you have taken the Lone Star as the emblem of your new venture," Mr. Webb says. "For several years I have been a close student of Texas frontier history and in a general way of American Western history. In slanting your publication Texasward, I believe you have filled a gap in American literature. The real part that Texas has played in the history of the nation and in its literature has not been appreciated by very many and has been set forth by fewer still. Texas

has been the scene of conflict of civilizations: Indians against Indians (timber and plain); Spaniard and Indian; Spaniard and American; complete independence; final union with America of the North. On the whole, it is a thrilling and dramatic story, this history of Texas."

THE SANTA FE TRAIL

ANOTHER thrilling and dramatic story is that of the old Santa Fe trail and those hardy traders and mule-skinners who faced its countless hardships and perils. Around this picturesque trail Arthur D. Howden Smith has written a great novel, "Trader's Luck," which will open our next issue. "Trader's Luck" gives a vivid picture of the Old West, the great wagon trains bound for distant Santa Fe, the Missouri River in the days of the great steamboat traffic, the outfitting towns where traders, gamblers, merchants, mountain men, trappers, trailers, and all the varied frontier characters met and rubbed shoulders. Kit Carson figures in the story, as does St. Vrain, and Bent's Fork—and dozens of characters and places that are bywords for the Old West.

Clem Yore will be back in the next number with another of his packed-full-of-action Western novelettes; and Oscar Schisgall will return with a novelette of South American pioneering. The third novelette will be "White Magic," an African tale by Charles Beadle.

One of the last stands of the old cattle kings and the open range was the Johnson County Cattle War, in Johnson County, Wyoming. It's outcome decided, once and for all, that the open range must give way to the small settler and the farmer—but it was a thrilling struggle while it lasted. Arthur Chapman has told the story entertainingly in an article which will be a feature of the next issue.

And there will be the usual good short stories, with scenes laid in the West, the North, and the Far East.

A NEWCOMER

AMONG the Far Eastern stories in this number is one by Al Priddy, a newcomer to THE FRONTIER. Although this is his first story we have published, Mr. Priddy is an experienced writer—and an experienced traveler as well. Of his story, "Bait for the Wily," he says:

"Nat Hathaway is the type of adventuring fellow, representative for the textile machinery firm, who, with chalk-line and wrench, plants new industrial epochs on all frontiers. The Hathaways I have known have planted mills in China, India, Russia, in isolated islands of Japan, etc. As a mill-boy I have worked with them here in America. They used to be a very romantic type, hard-fisted, keeping the workers in awe, a law unto themselves, flitting about from place to place, making the new frontiers, men and women, walk their chalk-lines."

WEST AFRICA

AS USUAL, James K. Waterman, whose Sea Fox story, "A Tip from Jim Bowie," appears in this issue, has a good yarn to tell about the early days of the Black Continent.

"It is a strange thing that nowhere on the West Coast is a white man hated so bitterly as in the English colony of Sierra Leone," he remarks. "Here is the way in which a negro preacher explains the origin of a race to whom he owed about all but the air he breathed:

"'My bredden, you see white man bad too much, ugly too much, no good. You want sabby how man like that come to lib in the world? Well, I tell you. Adam and Eve, dey colored people, very handsome; lib in one beautiful garden. Dere dey hab all things dat be good. Plantains, yams, sweet potatoes, foo-foo palm wine—he-igh, too much! Den dey hab two childrum, Cain and Abel. Cain no like Abel's palaver; one day he kill 'm. Den God angry and he say, "Cain!" Cain go hide himself; he t'ink him berry claber. Heigh-heigh! God say again, "Cain, you t'ink I no see you, you bush-nigger, eh?" Den Cain come out and he say, "Yes, Massa, I lib here. What de matter, Massa?" Den God say in one big voice like de tunder in de sky, "Where'm broder Abel?" Den Cain turn white all ober with fear. Dat de first white man, bredden.'"

THE RHODESIAN PIONEERS

SEVERAL of our readers have pointed out that searchlights and Maxims were hardly in use in 1879 as L. Patrick Greene had them in "Three Thousand Acres," which appeared in a recent number. Mr. Greene hastens to apologize for his mistake and to say that the date should have been 1889 instead of 1879.

"The Rudd concession which secured for the English the valuable territory now known as Rhodesia," he explains, "was

granted by King Lobenguella in 1888, and a charter was granted to the Rudd-Rhodes people in the first months of 1890.

"The Boers considered that 2,000 men was the smallest number necessary for a peaceful occupation of the country. A well known British officer said, when consulted, it would need 1000 men and 250,000 pounds for their pay.

"Major Johnson undertook the job for approximately ninety thousand pounds sterling. His force consisted of 179 Pioneers, a troop of the Chartered Company's police—about 400 white men all told—and 150 natives. Out of his ninety thousand pounds Johnson had to buy bullocks, wagons, stores, arms and ammunition and pay the members of the force. With the expedition was a proper medical staff organized by the Jesuit fathers; two chaplains, an Anglican and a Roman Catholic, and a veterinary surgeon. There were ninety wagons and four water carts. The armament of the artillery troop consisted of four Maxims, two 7-pounder field guns and twenty war rockets with two war-rocket tubes. In addition to the electric light plant and searchlight a complete steam saw-mill was carried.

"Quite a few Americans were with the Pioneer force, notably Captain Heany, better known as Major Heany, the most popular man in Rhodesia."

BOUND FOR THE FRONTIER

WHERE is the present frontier? Well, there are still quite a few of them, and if you follow THE FRONTIER you are very likely to find yourself bound for one of them. Already the wanderers and the keepers of the outposts have taken to it and we have had several reports of copies of THE FRONTIER finding their way into out-of-the-way places.

"Five days after the publication of its first number I made the acquaintance of THE FRONTIER," says one reader. "High up on a lonely point near the tip end of the Maine coast, in an empty ranger's cabin I found nothing—except a copy of the first FRONTIER. The sea on one side, the forest on the other, not a human habitation within miles; surely it was a modern FRONTIER setting, an ideal location in which to meet the frontiersman of magazines."

FROM THE OZARKS

EDWARD PARRISH WARE has located a very real frontier of the present day. From his Ozark Mountain camp he writes of his story, "The Better Breed," which appears in this issue:

"The Sunken Land country lies in the northeast corner of Arkansas, extending up into Missouri as far as the town of New Madrid, and it is about as I have described it—as nearly as I am able to describe so vast and wonderful a thing as the Great Swamp. Some of it has been settled, but the greater portion remains as it has been since it sank, in the year 1811. The people dwelling 'inside' are, for the most part, illiterate, few of them ever having a chance to go to school. They are, however, real folks, for all that; as kindly and as well-disposed as others who dwell in a much better environment. Some of the finest friends I have are 'swamp rats,' and I never go near the place without looking them up. I'd lose a lot if I did."

Though he prefers to talk about the Swamp, of himself he says: "Reared at Jonesboro, within twenty-odd miles of the Great Swamp, I began exploring it when still a youngster; hunting and fishing was then—and is now, for that matter—finer there than in any other section of the United States; deer and bear and turkey, they were there in plenty: so were the bass and crappie and big bullfrogs. I preferred the Swamp to the books in my father's law office, but was, nevertheless, ready to hang out my 'shingle' when I became of age. Then I 'ditched' the Law, and went on the stage. For the ensuing ten years I followed the theatrical business, playing character parts and directing during the final years. Then, just as I was on the eve of reaping a real reward for my ten years of preparation, I ditched the theatrical business and became a tramp. After knocking about for two years I found myself, one day, in the Argentine Republic stone broke. On top of that, I was homesick. I stowed away on a British ship and was put ashore at Rio Janeiro; there a hard-boiled Norwegian skipper took me on as first assistant to the cook. The craft was a windjammer, a barkentine, and it was so dilapidated and rotten of hull, I could, I firmly believe, have punched holes in her with my thumb. But it got me back to the States—where I have stayed since."

AND BACK TO TEXAS

WE BELIEVE that you will find "Seven Gay Riders," Robert V. Carr's story in this issue, a great tale; and we believe that the secret of it lies in Mr. Carr's letter.

"About the genesis of 'Seven Gay Riders,'" he says. "Well, there's a lot of experience back of that story!

"Dakota territory, early '80's. Sod houses. Hay twists and buffalo chips for fuel. Seven-year-old boy on a roan pony, herding cattle on the open prairie. He is barefooted, but, when winter comes, he will wrap his feet and legs in gunny-sacks.

"Blizzards. Cloud-bursts. Prairie fires. Falls with horses. Knocked cold by lightning. Swimming horse across stream in flood time. Sun and dust. All sorts of narrow squeaks.

"Round-up camps. Cottonwood log ranch-houses. Meeting all sorts of riders. Sprawling cow-towns. Saloons, dance-halls and gambling joints.

"Texas 'dogies' drifting out from the pens into a spring storm. A coulee full of dead cattle. Wolves waiting for a chance to hamstring a weak cow.

"A thousand and one other experiences, to say nothing of seeing boom towns spring up where once the chuck wagon stood.

"I have tried to explain how it came about that the riders were swept into oblivion by the tide of civilization. I hope they will be satisfied with the way I have presented them. They had to go on, exactly as the Sioux warrior had to go on. Puny man may not combat Destiny, whether he be a Sioux, a gay rider, or an aviator daring the high frontier."

YOUR LOCAL STORIES

MANY of our readers do not have the time or inclination to sit down and write full-page letters such as we publish in the Trading Post, but quite a few of them know of interesting little local anecdotes which, if passed on to the rest of us, would make interesting reading. Many of you have bits of unique information which no one else can give, and which will add a patch to the quilt of American frontier development and history we are weaving. Even the tiniest town had its frontier days and very likely possesses some frontier incidents which would prove of national interest. If you know of any such, write them out in a few sentences and send them along; no need to write a complete letter, just describe the incident as briefly as you can.

For incidents of this sort we shall set aside a portion of the Trading Post, under the heading "Do You Know That——" This little column will be entirely your own, and we shall leave it to you to fill. Already a few of these little anecdotes and interesting items have come in and are passed on to you below.

DO YOU KNOW THAT—

(1) The bowie-knife, the famous frontiersman's weapon, was named after Col. James Bowie who made it famous in many combats and who finally died in the Alamo with a pile of dead Mexicans around him?

(2) The Founder of one of the Original Thirteen Colonies (Ogelthorpe, of Georgia) was still alive at the time of the Revolution, was offered command of the British forces in the rebelling colonies, refused it; and was one of the first to welcome and congratulate the first American Minister to Great Britain after the war?

(3) That Daniel Boone, founder of Kentucky and pioneer of the famous Wilderness Road and Boone Trail, was afterward refused the contract to help survey and widen this same trail, and finally died almost in poverty?

THE MAIL SACK

FIRST this month is a Westerner, one who has had experiences which it certainly must be enjoyable to live over again in the fiction he reads:

Editor, THE FRONTIER,
Dear Sir:—

An interesting story to me is one wherein I find myself—my own thoughts, desires and feelings—all down in black on white. I have experienced moods and emotions indefinable by myself and yet, as I read, I find these very moods expressed by my favorite authors. After all, men who love and live the outdoor life are made of the same good stuff.

Such tales as are printed in THE FRONTIER bring back the old days in the West: fast moving scenes of long, hard days in the saddle; strenuous hours of branding, lips caked with dirt and dust, nostrils tender to the smoke of burning hide and hair; times of doctoring for distemper, running fingers in unseen sores, spitting and gagging with the foul breath of diseased animals in my face; memories of long lines of bawling, shaggy, lean and humped, snow-covered cattle working toward the stack-yard, awaiting the feeder with his face blizzard-whipped to a red-brown color, lips swollen and cracked, the whistling wind cutting breath from sore lungs; sleepless nights at weaning time, with frantic cows brushing and bawling around the bunk-house, and the heart-touching *m-m-bahking* of half starved calves deprived of their sucking.

Believe me, those who get their ideas of the West from the silver screen and think that there is nothing to do but loaf around the bunk-house or perch high upon the corral fence are sadly in want of the truth. But those who know —well, to them the wavering notes of the coyote

in the buck brush awaiting a drop of rain to wet his nose, the smell of the sage, are sweet indeed.

Sincerely,

Les. Merrin,
Butler, Ohio.

Next comes a dentist, and a mighty good judge of fiction:

Editor, THE FRONTIER,
Dear Sir:—

Just finished reading THE FRONTIER, and I believe it will be even more popular than SHORT STORIES if the stories in this issue are any criterion of what are to follow; and, from the list to appear in the next issue, they look as good, if not better.

"The Valley of Adventure" was best, possibly due to its length, but they are all good. I read it through in two "sittings."

I shall surely look forward to the 20th of each month.

Sincerely,

Dr. W. W. Baade,
Campbell, Minnesota.

Here are a few words from a sailor who intends to ship with THE FRONTIER regularly. For his, and your, information, we intend to publish at least one fine sea story in each number of the magazine.

Editor, THE FRONTIER,
Dear Sir:

Just completed your first issue of FRONTIER and wish to compliment you on your success in getting her off the stays without a mishap.

The attraction in your magazine is the world-wide variety of stories. I do hope you have more sea stories; maybe it's because I have sailed on real ships, both sailing and steam, but nevertheless I was born with eyes to see and appreciate the wonderful romance of a "dog's life" at sea. The sea is an unconquered frontier, there is always a new field of romance and tragedy in it.

Hoping you have a successful voyage and keep her off the rocks!

Respectfully,

J. S. VINESTEAD,
New York City.

And here is one from an old Indian-fighter, one who knew at first hand many of the noted characters who appear in our pages:

Editor, THE FRONTIER,
Dear Sir:—

A copy of THE FRONTIER lies before me and I write to say that I am interested in it for two reasons. First, because it contains some very interesting stories of the early frontier days. Second, because I am of that country, having spent almost a quarter of a century between the Canadian line and the Mexican border. I am a veteran of the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne Indian wars, serving under General George Crook, and was twice wounded. I later rode the range from Washington to the Panhandle.

During my frontier life I met and knew personally most all the noted characters among whom were Buffalo Bill, Captain Jack Crawford, Big Bat, Little Bat, Frank Gerard, and many others—not forgetting Calamity Jane and her side-kicker, Frankie Glass.

Respectfully yours,

J. O. Ward,
P. O. Box 242,
Bellflower, Calif.

A Northwoodsman closes the sack:

Editor, THE FRONTIER,
Dear Sir:—

I lived in the North Woods from the time I was four years old until four years ago when I came to this city. A magazine like THE FRONTIER helps a fellow a lot when he has a "hankering" for the open spaces. May I congratulate you on the publishing of such a magazine as this.

Yours sincerely,

Harry J. Schipper,
99 Odell St.,
Schenectady, N. Y.

OUR NEW APPEARANCE

YOU have just finished reading the first issue of THE FRONTIER printed on the new paper, and we hope the change has made for pleasanter reading. We think the magazine looks better on this new whiter and better quality stock, and are well satisfied to stand the additional expense if the result is more satisfactory to you.

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Resist the forces that are sapping your vital powers. Banish the weakness that makes your life a wretched failure. Stop experimenting with dope and drugs and foolish fads. Shake off Catarrh, Constipation, Indigestion, Dyspepsia, Bad Blood, Rupture, Nervousness, Youthful Errors, Vital Depletion, Impotency, and the other results of neglect and abuse (see Consultation Coupon).

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Banish Your Ailments. You can be Healthy, Virile, and Successful—you can free yourself of the weaknesses and defects that rob you of the Joys of Life; and that sooner or later will cause you to lose your self-respect, your friends and your position. You can build yourself up—develop your muscles—clear your befuddled brain—strengthen and correct every organ and function and get a new start in life, if you will.

Come To Me in Full Confidence. Don't be afraid to tell me your full story. The more confidence you place in me, the more quickly I can help you. Come to me as you would to a brother and let me help you correct past errors and achieve your fondest hopes and ambition. Remember that everything you tell me will be held in the strictest confidence.

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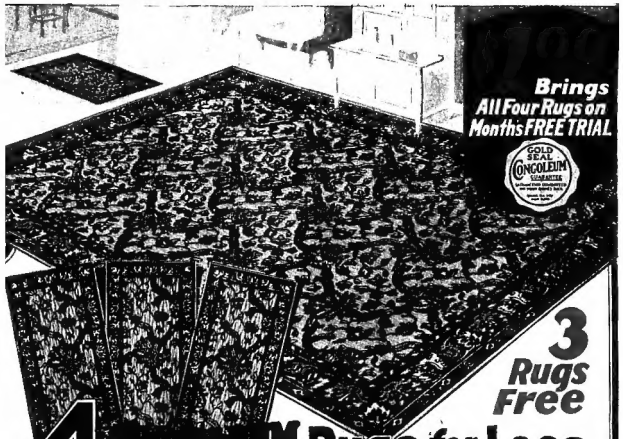

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